



presents

ISRAEL-IRAN-USA THE LONG WAR

2x52 '

Produced by ARTE France & Temps Noir
Directed by Ilan Ziv & Vincent De Cointet

Targeted assassinations, bombings, unidentified military attacks are piling up all over the Middle East. Can the "secret war" between Iran and Israel turn into a major regional if not global confrontation?



PITCH

Israel and Iran are enemies with irreconcilable ideologies. They accuse each other of terrorism. Everything seems to lead them to a fatal confrontation. Today, an untimely initiative, a misunderstanding could lead to an all-out war that would engulf the entire Middle East, at the risk of jeopardizing, from one side to the other, all international relations.

Yet the two countries have no common border, they are two thousand kilometres apart and have no territorial conflict.

In fact, a muffled war has already begun, as the region has experienced various jolts and alliance reversals: the Iran-Iraq war, the wars in Lebanon, missed opportunities for peace in the last forty years since the advent of the Islamic revolution in Tehran. How did it come to this?

Israel, Lebanon, Iran, United States: through **exceptional archives and unpublished testimonies** from leading political and military leaders, intelligence agents, this series of two 52-minutes films tells a story of the struggle for power: **the struggle for power in Israel and Iran**, the struggle for power in the Middle East.



TREATMENT

On the night of January 20-21, 2019, the Israeli Air Force conducts a series of strikes in Syria on Iranian targets. The next day, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed responsibility for an attack against Tehran. Until then, he maintained a form of voluntary ambiguity regarding his direct involvement on the Syrian field. Then two years ago, in January 2017, the security cabinet authorized, in great secrecy, strikes in Syria against Iranian targets.

No one can now ignore the existence of this **"state of war" between Iran and Israel**, the two dominant powers in the Middle East. A state of war reinforced by the renewed tension between the United States and Iran since President Trump decided to leave the nuclear agreement.

But what do these Israeli strikes on Iranian targets in Syria really mean? Do they foreshadow a direct conflict between the two countries or can we hope that they will be limited to the Syrian context? Could they degenerate into a regional war if the international community is not careful? Most importantly, what does this "state of war" tell us about the nature of the deep antagonism that governs the relationship between these two countries? Is it an ideological or geopolitical antagonism, is it linked to a difference in value system or power strategy? Finally, how much of the aggravation of the situation is due to political calculations, both in Tel Aviv and in Tehran? For much more than elsewhere, foreign policy and domestic policy are always closely intertwined in Iran as in Israel.

One thing is certain, the Syrian conflict constitutes a paradigm shift between Israel and Iran. The Syrian terrain has been added to the Lebanese terrain as a new point of fixation, of confrontation, between the two countries. Now, after more than seven years of war in Syria, Iranian forces are firmly established with their ally Assad and intend to take advantage of the upcoming reconstruction of the country to impose themselves on both geopolitical and economic levels. For its part, Israel considers Tehran's military presence in its Syrian neighbor as a vital threat and an immediate attack on its national interests.

This two-part film aims to tell the story of how Iran and Israel have progressively pitted themselves against each other and how each now perceives the other as a priority, even a mortal threat. These two countries have developed such aggressive rhetoric and defined such fundamentally opposed interests that a military conflict could erupt between them at any moment.

"Iran-Israel, the long war" is therefore **not only a military story but also a political and geostrategic one**. It is not a question of telling an Iranian and Israeli story but one that concerns international peace and security. A story that concerns us all.

SYNOPSIS

The first episode, "The beginning of the Conflict", tells the story of the genesis, the setting up of the elements of the conflict between the two countries. The change of regime in Iran with the creation of the Islamic Republic in February 1979 obviously acts as a trigger. Previously, the two countries were deeply close. Their political, military and economic elites met very regularly and worked in complete confidence, their societies rubbed shoulders and appreciated each other. Nevertheless, this old and idyllic vision should not be simplified. Israel and Iran were already in a competitive dynamic. Before his fall, the Shah had begun to distance himself from Israel in order to draw closer to his Arab neighbors, so as to be able to play the leading roles in the Middle East, Iran's historical vocation since the Persian Empire.

Israel's invasion of Lebanon in early June 1982 changed everything. By penetrating its neighbor in order to destroy the PLO and thus recompose the regional balance, Tsahal was going to confront an enemy whose devastating power it was unaware of: radical Shiite Islam through the birth of a new actor, Hezbollah. But behind this, it is Iran - whose links with the Lebanese Shiite community are historical - that is the initiator, protector and sponsor of this political-religious ideology. The deep, intrinsic link that Iran has with the Lebanese resistance is thus at the heart of its opposition to Israel. And Tehran, by penetrating the Lebanese terrain, is also breaking into what Tel Aviv considers its natural zone of influence. The dynamics of the confrontation between the two states were thus put in place in the early 1980s and are more than ever at work.

The second episode "A dialogue or a war" analyzes how and why Iran and Israel are now on the brink of a direct military confrontation. Syria is the new zone of this conflict. The upheavals in the Middle East since the early 1990s have literally pitted the two countries against each other. Each has become a priority threat to the other, and strives to deny the identity attributes of the other. Israel thus denies Iran what it allows itself, to be a ballistic and nuclear power in the name of its right to exist in the Middle East. So to ensure the continuity of its regime, Tehran considers that it has no choice but to develop a combination of nationalism, Shiite revolutionary messianism, the presence of its Guardians outside its borders, anti-Israeli obsession and fierce anti-Americanism. These two opposing dynamics feed each other more and more.

This second episode also sees the appearance of another actor, the United States, around which Iran and Israel will have to position themselves. After the duo of the first film, it is now the story of a trio that must be told; a trio whose relationships between each actor are shifting, evolving according to the upheavals of the international situation and the internal political situations. In this respect, the resolution of the nuclear crisis in 2015 appears today as an exception, an enchanted parenthesis in this conflictual dynamic. Today more than ever, the United States and Iran are on the verge of a military strike against Iran.



Episode 1: the beginning of the conflict

Forty years ago, there were tens of thousands of Israelis in Iran. They were involved in aid missions and in doing business there. They had set up schools for their children, opened branch offices for their companies, and built cultural centers. The understanding between the Israeli leadership and the Shah of Iran was strong, based on deep common interests. Iran supplied 60% of Israel's oil needs. These friendly relations were part of Israel's strategic plan to find non-Arab allies in the peripheral states of the region: Turkey and Iran.

On February 11, 1979, after a massive insurrection, Khomeini seized power in Iran. On that very day, the Israeli embassy was stormed by revolutionaries. The Israelis who were still residing in Iran had to leave the country. These were the last hours of the special relationship between Israel and Iran that had been built up over decades.

This relationship was further ended with Ayatollah Khomeini's invitation to a Palestinian delegation to take possession of Israeli diplomatic premises. At the head of the delegation, Yasser Arafat announced that "the road to Palestine now passes through Tehran". The advent of the Islamic Republic sent a seismic shockwave throughout the Middle East.

A number of young Iranian revolutionaries who held key positions in the new Islamic Republic had actually passed through Lebanon at one time or another in their lives in exile. Some of them were even trained there in revolutionary Palestinian camps.

In Lebanon, three years later, on 6 June 1982, Israel invaded Southern Lebanon to push the PLO out, as Palestinian fedayeen regularly attacked the Northern region of Israel. By entering Lebanon, Israel intended to transform the Middle East by permanently annihilating the PLO and allowing Lebanese Christian forces to elect their leader as President of Lebanon. The Israeli army crushed Palestinian resistance, pushed back Syrian forces and, in less than a week, was at the gates of Beirut. But very quickly, Israel, which had become an occupying power, found itself confronted with the complex political and ethnic structuring of Lebanon. In this new situation, a new political player asserted itself whose capacity for resistance and strike force no one had imagined: Shiite political Islam. Not only nobody imagined it, but most political players in the Middle East, including Israel, were blind to it. For example, they did not realize that the region of Tyre, just 25 kilometers from Israel, became a rallying point for Shiite students in search of a revolutionary route. They were increasingly attracted by an Islam that was religious but also politically and socially rebellious.

In Tehran, Israel's invasion of Lebanon came as a shock. A high-level Iranian delegation visited the Syrian capital to offer military and logistical assistance to Syria and Lebanon. This is how the Revolutionary Guard, an institution created in the early days of the Islamic Republic, set foot in Syria and then in Lebanon. This elite corps, a parallel army, was the Iranian regime's Praetorian Guard and was reporting directly to the Supreme Guide, Ayatollah Khomeini. The fact that, in the midst of a trying and perilous war with Iraq, Khomeini authorized the sending of soldiers to Lebanon shows that he saw it as a unique opportunity to fight against his enemies (Israel, but also the United States and France), and above all to influence the whole region.

Tehran's response to the Israeli invasion was thus an essential factor in the birth of the Islamic Resistance of Lebanon (IRL), the military embryo of the future Hezbollah. From then on, nothing would ever be the same again in Lebanon, nor between Iran and Israel.

Throughout the 1980s, Israel did not really understand the nature and importance of Hezbollah. They did not perceive that the organization, at once political, religious and military, was to become a major Lebanese party as well as Iran's advanced position in the region. However, the fact is that Lebanon became from then on, the force field of the confrontation of Iran and Israel through Hezbollah.

In 1989, after the death of Khomeini, the new Iranian leader, Rafsanjani, inaugurated a new diplomatic path by seeking dialogue with the West. After the eight-year conflict against Iraq, the country was weakened militarily and economically. The time has come to rebuild the country. The priority was the protection of the borders to guarantee the regime's survival. The internationalist tendency, which made the spread of the revolution a priority, now became a minority in the Iranian leadership.

When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990, there was, of course, no question of supporting him. Rafsanjani wanted to use this opportunity to show that the regional threat

did not come from Iran, but from Iraq. Rafsanjani adopted what he called "positive neutrality" and even authorized the American air force to use Iranian airspace to access Iraq. With this first Gulf conflict, Iraq, the sworn enemy of both Iran and Israel, was defeated and weakened. Israel and Iran, the new dominant players in the region, were now face to face. For better or for worse.

Episode 2: Dialogue or War?

After the victory of the first Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, America called for a regional conference to create a new order in the Middle East in 1991 that would take place in Madrid. It was a way of acknowledging America's new global position. It brought together Israelis, Syrians, Egyptians and Palestinians for the first time. Iran was not invited even though its new president, Rafsanjani, had been trying to launch a policy of détente since his election in 1989.

Tehran concluded that it had no choice but to make America pay dearly for its attitude by sabotaging its action. Mohtashamipour, Khomeini's man of confidence who had sponsored the creation of Hezbollah, was charged with launching a "counter-conference", one week before the Madrid Conference. The focus was Palestine. Forty Muslim countries were invited to this "Tehran Conference". The new Supreme Guide, Khamenei found himself at the head of a front of refusal: refusal of the occupation, refusal to negotiate with Israel and refusal of a "Pax americana" in the Middle East. Iran started to give open support to Palestinian and Arab militant groups (namely Hezbollah, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad) and the "street" against pro-Western Arab governments and against Israel.

On 16 February 1992, the first public assassination of a key Hezbollah leader by Israel took place. Hezbollah's response was not long in coming. On March 17, a suicide bomber drove a van loaded with explosives into the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, killing 86 people and injuring more than 300. The Iranian regime was held largely responsible for the attack. Détente was no longer the agenda of the Iranian regime. With Iran's active support, Hezbollah became a well-equipped and trained army of more than 50 000 soldiers. Hamas officially opened an office in the Iranian capital in 1993.

The policy pursued by both Iran and Israel inevitably fed a dynamic of an increasingly violent enmity between the two countries which brought them closer to a possible direct confrontation.

In October 2001, the American response to 11 September was deployed in Afghanistan. The United States discovered that its main enemy might not be Iran or Hezbollah, but rather the Sunni radical Islam embodied by the terrorist group al-Qaida. To prepare for this military campaign against the Taliban regime, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell knew that he would

have to seek Iran's help. The exchanges were fruitful, both on the military campaign itself and on the future of the country once the Taliban regime was defeated.

The defeat of the Taliban was seen as a victory by Iran: this should pave the way for Iran to be accepted as a constructive player in stabilizing the region. Iranian leaders made it known through various channels that they were ready to find accommodation with the US government.

On the other hand, Ariel Sharon, the Israeli Prime Minister, wished to restrict as much as possible this rapprochement which he thought would weaken Israel. The many supporters of Israel within the American government managed to block it. More than that, George W. Bush's description of Iran, Iraq and North Korea as "the axis of evil" undermined any chance of transaction between the US and Iran. With today's hindsight, we can see this moment as a missed opportunity for a more peaceful Middle East...

In 2003, the United States terminated Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Would Syria and Iran be the next targets? Would the Middle East and the Gulf be turned into a vast area totally dominated by Washington and its allies?

This could but reinforce the perception of Iran as being surrounded by hostile neighbors. However, the new guide then made an unprecedented global proposal through Swiss diplomacy: the disarmament of Hezbollah, the acceptance of the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and thus the recognition of Israel. In exchange, he wanted members of the People's Mujahedeen organization to be handed over to him. Some in the US government were in favor of the Tehran proposal, but the proposal was finally rejected again.

As is often the case in Iran, this refusal by Washington weakened the moderates who were in favor of an attempt at dialogue and strengthened furthermore the ultraconservative wing of the regime. This uncompromising position of the American neo-conservatives was shared by the Israeli government: Iran would never change its policy, they thought.

In 2009, the new Israeli and American presidents, Netanyahu and Obama, met and they could not agree on the attitude towards Iran and its nuclear ambitions. Even if Barack Obama also intended to prevent Iran from building an atomic bomb, he contrasted with the vocabulary used by his predecessor and his "axis of evil".

The strategic approaches of the two historical allies were no longer aligned.

At the end of 2011, Netanyahu considered that there was an urgency to strike in order to stop the Iranian program. Barack Obama realized that he would not be able to hold the Israelis back for very long if nothing progressed on the diplomatic level. Contrary to the expectations of the Israelis, Tehran agreed to engage seriously in a process of secret negotiations. To prevent Iran from getting back on its feet, Netanyahu came to denounce the agreement before the American Congress. Four months later, on July 14, 2015, the agreement was nevertheless

finally signed in Vienna. Tehran agreed to place its nuclear program under international tutelage in exchange for a gradual lifting of sanctions.

Less than three years later, on 8 May 2018, Donald Trump, the new American President, announced his withdrawal from the JCPOA, the agreement on Iran's nuclear program. More than ever, the rattling of swords is resounding in the Persian Gulf.

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FRANKA SCHWABE
Sales Manager

f-schwabe@arteFrance.fr

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