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CURRENT AFFAIRS

**ANALYSIS
WAR GAMING IRAN**

TRANSCRIPT OF A RECORDED DOCUMENTARY

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KROENIG: It's my estimation that a military strike designed to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons is the least bad option.

BERGMAN: My assessment of this is that there is a probability that Israel will strike during 2012

MOUSAVIAN If the US or Israel start, they would retaliate; they would not sit at home. And I cannot imagine the US would be safe; the US infrastructures, diplomats, personnels, they would be safe anywhere in the world.

STOURTON: A war with Iran over its nuclear programme is more likely today than it has ever been; that is one thing – very often the only thing – that those we've spoken to for this programme seem to agree on.

President Obama's in-tray is full of the dangerous problems of the Middle East – but this dossier stands out, pushed to the top of the pile by the widespread suspicion that Iran could very soon fulfill the ambition to be a nuclear state. In this week's Analysis we will war-game the crisis. What would the consequences of armed conflict be, and can it be avoided?

The principals – Iran, Israel and the United States - share a long history of mutual mistrust. Israel's current government has been banging the tocsin of alarm about Iran's nuclear ambitions ever since it won election in 2009. And many Israelis are genuinely frightened – not least because of the bellicose rhetoric of the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Ronen Bergman is an Israeli journalist who has been covering relations with Iran for 15 years.

BERGMAN: This a post-traumatic nation and a post traumatic nation featuring annihilation. There is no day when I walk the streets of Tel Aviv or Haifa or Jerusalem when people don't come to me recognising my face as someone who's dealing with the Iranian threat and asking me the same repeated question. And the question is not if, but only when. Not if President Ahmadinejad would launch a nuclear strike against Israel but only when will he do it. People in Israel are convinced, right or wrong, but they are still convinced that President Ahmadinejad would bomb Israel. They hear his calls for the destruction of Israel, his support for suicide bombers, his ongoing aid to Jihadist movement in the Middle East and they believe what he says.

STOURTON: The Americans point to perceived perfidy in past negotiations; the Iranians keep trying to hide what they are doing. Tehran may say it's only pursuing a civil nuclear programme within the terms of its international obligations, but the United States just doesn't believe that. Mark Fitzpatrick works at the Institute for International Strategic Studies in London, and is close to some of those in President Obama's team.

FITZPATRICK: You know that obviously is what they say and I think the answer to that is because you violated your safeguards obligations, you created a deficit of trust, and to overcome that deficit you now have to undertake some special obligations and that means limiting the activity that is causing so much concern. And you know that you don't need to undertake this activity for any purpose other than to have a nuclear hedging strategy; and your claims that this is all entirely peaceful, nobody buys that because it's obvious you don't need it.

STOURTON: **Iranian officials, for their part, still hark back to the way the British and Americans organised a coup against their democratically elected prime minister in the 1950s, and to Western support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Ambassador Syed Hossein Mousavian was a senior Iranian diplomat and nuclear negotiator who now works in academia in the United States. He fell out with the current regime in Tehran but remains sympathetic to Iran's position.**

MOUSAVIAN: I think the Westerners, they always forget it was Saddam Hussein which started attacking Iran with the chemical weapons which the material and technology know-how was provided unfortunately by the Western countries. When we had the unfortunate events of 9/11 in the US, Iran was the first country in the region condemning the attack. Iran made such a great, good gesture against terrorism and the US immediately after winning Afghanistan named Iran as the "axis of evil".

STOURTON: **You have been directly involved in negotiations over nuclear matters. Do you think the United States negotiates in good faith or that in fact it wants regime change in Tehran?**

MOUSAVIAN: I believe the core strategy of the US right after revolution has been based on regime change and they have not changed their strategy. I mean even when President Obama announced engagement with Iran, I was very much optimistic. But during three years of Obama's presidency, we have had the most hostile actions by the US against Iran in the history of Iran-US relations after the Revolution while we were supposed to have engagement policy.

STOURTON: **And so far each episode in this long-running saga has made things worse.**

In late 2002 it emerged that Iran had been secretly running a large scale nuclear research programme which involved enriching uranium. It fuelled suspicions that they were intent on developing nuclear weapons, and the foreign ministers of Britain, Germany and France led a diplomatic initiative to defuse the crisis. 2003 saw a summer of intense negotiation. Jack Straw was the Foreign Secretary.

STRAW: Dr Rohani, who was leading the Iranian delegation in Tehran, looked at his watch and said it was time for us all to go and see the President. And in unison the three of us on the other side - de Villepin, Fischer and myself - said "But there's nothing to go and see him about." Dominique said "Our planes are at the airport" and Joschka said, "And we're perfectly happy to go and get on them" and so we got up. There was an adjournment and we watched the Iranian delegation working the telephones and, we assumed, to the advisers to the Supreme Leader. The net result was that by the afternoon we'd got an agreement with the Iranians and they agreed to suspend nuclear enrichment for a period.

STOURTON: If you fast forward a few months, summer of 2004, they said they were going to start enriching uranium again.

STRAW: (over) Yeah.

STOURTON: And people who look at this from today's perspective would say that you've described a diplomatic success but that illustrates the fact that in the long-term that isn't enough.

STRAW: Well, the truth was that the Iranians were negotiating with Germany, France and the United Kingdom as available proxies for the United States. And Khatami whose position was becoming weaker - partly because he couldn't deliver and he couldn't deliver because in my judgement partly because of intransigence by the Right Wing of the Republican government in the US - he was being undermined. The Conservative forces were regrouping in Iran and that led to Ahmadinejad's election.

STOURTON: Mr Straw earned some powerful enemies in Washington by his dealings with Iran; one senior Bush administration official dubbed him "Teheran Jack". But he is by no means the only Iran watcher to judge that the hawks in Washington and the hawks in Teheran feed off one another.

As things stand the diplomatic position is this. The Iranians have signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty - or NPT. That does allow them to enrich uranium and they insist they are doing so purely for the purpose of developing a civil nuclear programme. Syed Hossein Mousavian.

MOUSAVIAN: I am convinced Iran is not after nuclear weapon. I am totally convinced. What Iran is looking is the legitimate rights on their NPT, which includes enrichment, because this is the legitimate right of every member and Iran is not going to let the West single out Iran and to deprive Iran from its legitimate rights on enrichment.

STOURTON: But because Iran has repeatedly violated the safeguards required by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN Security Council has ruled that it should accept additional obligations.

The current crisis, like that of 2003, began with the revelation that Iran has been hiding part of its nuclear programme; at a place called Fordow near the Shia holy city of Qom the Iranians have been enriching uranium to a level very close to that needed for nuclear weapons. Mark Fitzpatrick.

FITZPATRICK: Fordo is the new enrichment facility that was revealed to the world in September 2009 by President Obama. Iran had tried to keep this secret, but Iran is using it for enrichment - 700 centrifuges are producing enriched uranium. And they're producing at the level of 20%, ostensibly in order to fuel the Tehran research reactor which is running out of fuel and which runs on fuel at 20%, but they have enough for seven years or more of operation and they could get fuel from international marketplace - 20% or so close to weapons grade that if they have a stockpile of 20%, they would only need a short amount of time to bring it up to 90% and have a weapon. So it's a latent weapons capability.

ANSARI Well my reading of it is is that they've left it I suppose inconveniently ambiguous.

STOURTON: **Professor Ali Ansari is the director of the Iranian Institute at the University of St. Andrews and an Associate Fellow of the Foreign Affairs think tank Chatham House.**

ANSARI Actually there are many different views competing in Iran. Some are genuinely looking for a nuclear energy programme; others are certainly interested in weaponisation, but that decision hasn't been made yet. I think there are even others who simply are enriching uranium because it's something that the Americans have told them they can't do, so there's a sort of view that you know whatever irritates the West has to be positive. It's very rare in the Iranian media now to get a debate about the nuclear programme - but when you do there are sometimes some fairly sort of blunt questions about what is the point of this uranium enrichment, what are we doing it for, where are we heading. It's not entirely clear, and my view is is that actually that decision - a decision about where they're heading - hasn't really been settled in Iran itself.

STOURTON: **The crisis has been brought to a head now because of the way Fordow is constructed.**

The facility is 80 metres below ground, which makes it very difficult to damage. In 1981 the Israelis struck what they believed to be a very effective blow against Saddam Hussein's nuclear programme with an airstrike on the Osirak reactor near Baghdad. But Israel's leaders believe their opportunity to do anything remotely similar to Iran is rapidly running out.

Ronen Bergman has conducted extensive interviews with one of the central players on the Israeli side – the former Prime Minister and now defence minister Ehud Barak.

BERGMAN: Minister of Defence Barak has coined the expression "the zone of immunity" - the point on the timeline after which Iran nuclear sites are going to become immune to an Israeli strike. According to Israeli intelligence, Iran is going to reach the zone of immunity in nine months. So Israel, according to this assessment, has a window of opportunity of nine months to attack. There is a sense of urgency. The military in Israel is preparing for a strike, there is a huge military build-up and a lot of people believe that 2012 is the year when a decision must be taken.

ARCHIVE - NETANYAHU MEETS OBAMA.

NETANYAHU: You appreciate Mr President that Israel must reserve the right to defend itself. And after all that's, that's the very purpose of the Jewish State – control over our destiny.

STOURTON: The threat of an Israeli strike against Iran was hanging heavy in the air when the Israeli Prime Minister Beyamin Netanyahu arrived in Washington to see President Obama earlier this month. Iran is – and Israel's leaders of course know this very well – a dangerous political issue for the president in an election year; his Republican opponents have already started calling for a tougher stand.

Mr Obama laid out his position in a speech to AIPAC, the main pro-Israel lobbying group in the United States. He condemned what he called “loose talk of war”, but laid it on the line for Iran as well.

ARCHIVE - OBAMA AT AIPAC

OBAMA: Iran's leaders should understand that I do not have a policy of containment; I have a policy to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. I will not hesitate to use force when it is necessary to defend the United States and its interests.

STOURTON: That speech does seem to have bought the President some time. Subsequent reports from Jerusalem suggested that the Israelis have put off a decision on military action until the autumn at the very earliest. And there is now the prospect of renewed negotiations.

But that does not mean the problem has gone away – far from it. And none of the options facing the President are easy or appealing.

The risks of a policy which allowed Iran to have a bomb are difficult to predict – but they could be very grave. Dr Emily Landau is at the Institute for National Security Studies, the security think-tank affiliated to Tel Aviv University.

LANDAU: Iran is not primarily concerned with maintaining its own security within its borders, but rather it has designs to change the face of the Middle East basically. It wants to call the shots. And this is driven by ideology, religious ideology. Israel's place in the region is something that they totally reject. So while not actually using a nuclear bomb against Israel, there's a lot of things that Iran can do short of that to make life miserable for Israel and the Middle East. Now if there's no real appetite right now to attack Iran's nuclear facilities because of the fears of you know what the response will be from Iran, just think what the situation would be if we're talking about a nuclear Iran.

STOURTON: Other states in the region would be equally worried by the ambitions of an Iran armed with nuclear weapons, and some of them would almost certainly try to acquire their own. Mark Fitzpatrick.

FITZPATRICK: If Iran gets the bomb, Saudi Arabia has made it very clear that they need the bomb too. Now how would Saudi Arabia get a bomb? If they try to develop it on their own, they would need 10, 15 years. So they would probably try to buy one or more likely ask Pakistan for one. And there was some deal back when the Saudis financed Pakistan's nuclear weapons development programme that Pakistan would provide a quid pro quo in the future if Saudi Arabia ever came to the point where they needed a nuclear deterrent. And then what happens? Egypt looks around and sees you know not just has one nuclear weapon state, Israel, but it has Iran, now Saudi Arabia. They would go for it too. And then would Algeria be far behind? Would Turkey be far behind? The desire to have nuclear options is probably inevitable.

STOURTON: Nuclear proliferation would be especially dangerous in a region like the Middle East – Israel of course already has the bomb, although it doesn't officially admit the fact. And the region has, you could argue, become more, rather than less unstable since the Arab spring. Iran has an interest in most of the flashpoints; it's main regional ally, Syria, is in the throes of a near civil war. The Saudis believe Teheran is encouraging unrest among the Shiites of Bahrain. And Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed movement in Southern Lebanon, has thousands of missiles trained on Israel. Matthew Kroenig, of the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, worked on Iran for the Pentagon until last year and is one of those now advocating an attack by the United States.

KROENIG: Any one of these crises then would have the possibility of escalating into a nuclear exchange, and, given Israel's small size, a nuclear exchange against Israel could very well mean the end of the state of Israel. And Iran is developing ballistic missile capabilities. Former secretary of Defence Gates said that experts estimate within five years Iran could have ballistic missiles capable of reaching the East Coast of the United States, so a crisis between Iran and the United States could escalate into nuclear attack against the US homeland itself.

STOURTON: That chilling assessment carries echoes of some of the rhetoric in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq.

If the “do nothing” option is not really an option at all, what about the military alternative?

President Obama has to plan on the basis that if the crisis does turn into a shooting war America is likely to be directly involved in the conflict – either because Israel acts first and the United States gets drawn in, or because he himself concludes that American action is the best policy. Matthew Kroenig again.

KROENIG: There's a big difference between the US military option and, and Israel's military option. Israel has more limited capabilities, would do less damage to Iran's nuclear programme. So I argue that if military action is going to be taken, it should be the United States and not Israel. I think there are things the United States can do to try to manage a conflict. Look at it from Iran's point of view for a second. If they wake up one morning and their key nuclear facilities are destroyed, they have their own strategic dilemma. The regime's still intact, the military's still intact, and they know that a full-scale war with the United States could jeopardise that. If they don't strike back hard enough, they could lose face; but if they strike back too hard, they could lose their heads. And so I think that in that situation Iran is most likely going to aim for some kind of calibrated response - to retaliate in some way but not to go too far.

MOUSAVIAN They are prepared, I mean they are completely prepared.

STOURTON: **Ambassador Syed Hossein Mousavian.**

MOUSAVIAN: If the US or Israel start, they would retaliate; they would not sit at home. And they in retaliation also would be very powerful.

STOURTON: **I mean does that mean, for example, you think that they would use Hezbollah to strike Israel and other things of that kind?**

MOUSAVIAN: When you mentioned Hezbollah, I think it would not be the only case. Of course we remember in 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli confrontation, and Israel with all weapons of mass destruction, they could not even defeat Hezbollah. Therefore how you can imagine Israel would be able to resist such a powerful country like Iran, confronting Israel directly and punishing all those countries which they advocated war against Iran. And I cannot imagine the US would be safe; the US infrastructures, diplomats, personnels, they would be safe anywhere in the world. Because this would not only be Iran - you can imagine how a military strike would encourage all Muslims in the region to participate in a retaliation.

STOURTON: **Bullish talk like that is likely to worry those observers of Iran who argue that there is a "war party" in Tehran just as there is in Washington and Jerusalem. Ali Ansari.**

ANSARI: There are some among the leadership, including Ahmadinejad, who've generally calculated that they could sustain an Israeli attack and some of them are even quite encouraging of it. I mean they, I think they think it would do good in unifying the country and diverting attention, but I don't think they've generally done the calculations in terms of where it might lead in terms of escalation and I certainly think that most of them would be deeply uneasy about anything which involved the United States. But unfortunately there is a degree of naivety among certain sectors of the political leadership in Iran.

STOURTON: That idea that a conflict can somehow be “managed” and need not escalate too far is shared by the hawks in both Tehran and Washington.

Those who oppose a strike argue that the consequences could be very grave indeed – for the region and beyond. In 2004, when he was foreign secretary, Jack Straw made headlines by stating that war with Iran was “inconceivable” – in today’s circumstances he’s moved back from that view, but he still believes the risks involved in an American strike against Iran are too high.

STRAW: You’d get huge divisions in the international community between the US and maybe the United Kingdom, on the one hand; other European countries somewhere in the middle; Russia and China, Brazil, India on the other, and it could lead to a major realignment in international relations of a kind that we have not seen up to now and an opportunity for Russia and for China to take over a leadership of foreign relations in a way they haven’t done up to now. So these are all uncertainties. I’m not saying these things will happen, but by God I’m saying they really need to be thought about. And what’s interesting is that there are some wise council in Israel who have exactly that view and who say of course we don’t want an Iran to have a nuclear weapons capability, nor to have nuclear weapons. Nor do I. But in terms of how we handle this, it may be better to work on a policy of containment and isolation than it is to go in for a straight military attack.

STOURTON: Even the champions of military action accept that it is unlikely to kill Iran’s nuclear ambitions for ever. The debate has thrown up one of those euphemisms that sometimes emerge from Washington security-speak – “mowing the lawn” – in other words, repeated strikes to keep Iran in order.

STOURTON: Can I finally ask you what you say to the argument that, putting all that aside for a moment, the real problem with military action is it probably won’t stop them developing nuclear weapons for very long.

LANDAU You’re right. And no-one should be under the illusion that we’ve tried everything and now military force will take care of the problem. It’s not going to take care of the problem, but it will get a message of determination across to Iran from the international community that Iran’s behaviour is unacceptable. Iran’s behaviour in the nuclear realm was unacceptable and Iran’s behaviour in the region is unacceptable. Iran’s rejectionist rhetoric towards Israel is unacceptable and the way Iran treats its own population is unacceptable. Now what do you do? If you have a determined proliferator that’s also a threat to the Middle East and it can’t be stopped by diplomatic means, what do you do? All those that are saying that military action will be so dangerous and so unstable and so unwise, what’s their alternative? That we should live with a nuclear Iran?

STOURTON: Emily Landau. So is there another option – a course of action that doesn’t end either in an unpredictable conflict or in an equally unpredictable proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region? Jack Straw believes there is.

STRAW: There are non-military means of putting pressure on a regime. And we've seen in the last 30 years some states who had unquestionably a nuclear weapons capability deciding to abandon that. We saw that with South Africa, we've seen that with Brazil. It's my belief that the Iranian regime is fundamentally weak, it does not carry the active consent of the Iranian people. I have a sufficient faith in the idea of freedom and democracy to think that you will in time see a very different kind of government in Iran. And if the economic and social pressure on Iran is kept up meanwhile, then it will be in Iranians' interests, without having a military action against them, to come in from the cold and to accept the obligations actually which, which they have signed up under the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

STOURTON: **So it's just, it's just a question of managing?**

STRAW: (over) It is a question of managing.

STOURTON: **Until Iran becomes a different kind of country?**

STRAW: Yes.

STOURTON: **You might call it containment – you might call it muddling through. Mark Fitzpatrick uses the term “nuclear hedge” to describe the compromise position the Iranians might be allowed to reach – a position where they were able to make a bomb but haven't actually done so. And he cites the 2003 diplomatic initiative by Jack Straw and his European counterparts as an example of the sort of approach that could work.**

FITZPATRICK: Why would Iran negotiate if what they really want is the bomb? I agree that they would not give up the capabilities that they have to have a nuclear hedge, but they, I think, would agree to some tactical limitations on their programme. They did in 2003 when the Europeans negotiated a suspension of the enrichment programme and I think it's conceivable that Iran would agree to stop some of the activities that are causing so much concern. Not give up the enrichment programme, which they can always save for a rainy day later on.

STOURTON: **What's your guess? Where will we be in a year's time?**

FITZPATRICK: My guess is that in a year's time we'll be pretty much where we are now - a little bit worse but not to the point where Iran is crossing the line between having a nuclear weapons capability and the line of producing nuclear weapons. Because Iran knows that if they cross that line, they will be discovered and at that point not just Israel but the United States will attack. It's going to be like the Cold War and I think eventually this Cold War between Iran and the West will end, but probably under circumstances that are different from the ones we have today.

STOURTON: **That approach would mean a negotiated agreement which everyone is able to interpret in a slightly different way. And that of course is exactly the kind of approach the Israeli government reject – they want real clarity about Washington's red lines, and they want the problem dealt with, not kicked into the long grass. Ronen Bergman.**

BERGMAN: I believe that at the end of the day if a reliable intelligence arrives to Israel suggesting that Iran is started to enrich uranium to military degree, then the Israeli Prime Minister would do what he thinks he must do in order to protect the citizens of Israel. Ehud Barak, the minister of defence, in one of our meetings, he says, “When they, the generals of the military, look up they see the Prime Minister and myself, the Minister of Defence. When we look up, we see nothing but the sky. It is our responsibility to defend the Jewish state and to take care of the future, the fate of the Jewish people, and we take this very, very seriously.” End of quote.

STOURTON: The containment strategy is bound to be fragile; it depends on everyone believing everyone else – to some degree anyway – and the legacy of mistrust on all sides is bound to make that difficult.

ARCHIVE - OBAMA SPEECH

OBAMA: Now is the time to heed the timeless advice from Teddy Roosevelt: Speak softly; carry a big stick.

STOURTON: Above all containment depends on the credibility of the United States; if Israel is to hold fire and Iran is to shrink from the final step over the nuclear threshold, both must believe that President Obama is willing to use that stick if he needs to.