

Hollywood Scripting and the Pentagon: Creating “The Enemy du Jour”

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Theme: [Media Disinformation, US NATO War Agenda](#)

This year’s Toronto International Film Festival highlights the new direction in film making: Iran is the enemy *du jour*, but at the same time it is not longer kosher to praise everything Israel

The empire requires a nice juicy enemy to keep people’s minds off its own sins. During the Cold War, Hollywood responded admirably to the challenge, churning out anti-communist thrillers with Russian bad guys, most memorably during Reagan’s surreal presidency, when “Red Dawn” and “Rocky IV” reduced international politics to a comic book parody.

Given who the official enemy is these days, it is no surprise that the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), which boasts of 72 participating countries, did not include a ‘Spotlight on Iranian cinema’ this year. On the contrary, it showcased the latest serving of propaganda against Iran with the premiere of “Argo”, a docudrama depicting the escape of six US diplomats from Iran following the November 1979 seizure of the US embassy in Tehran, when 52 Americans were held hostage, and Iranian student protesters dumped US diplomatic correspondence on the street in a spectacular premodern WikiLeaks.

“Argo” is based on then-Canadian ambassador Kenneth Taylor, who indeed hid the six Americans who showed up at the Canadian embassy during the 1979 hostage crisis and issued them fake Canadian passports. Taylor was made an Officer of the Order of Canada and awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in 1981 for his help.

As if scripted in Hollywood, the Friday evening TIFF premier began just hours after the announcement that Canada was closing its embassy in Tehran, adding extra spice.

“Argo” was produced by George Clooney and directed by Ben Affleck, who also plays the lead role of the CIA agent Tony Mendez, posing as director of a fake Canadian science-fiction film (appropriately entitled “Argo”). Mendez convinces Iranian officials that Iran’s stark desert panoramas would make a convincing extraterrestrial terrain (the Hollywood subtext being that Islamic Iran is loony and Iranian officials are easily duped).

Clooney and Affleck are not Zionist zealots. They are even criticized for being ‘pro-Palestinian’ (though that means very little in the case of Hollywood), and both are identified with opposition to US neocon wars. So their production of this blatant propaganda potboiler is a sad commentary on just how obsessed America is with the one country to successfully stand up to it and Israel today. It’s as if a muted critique of US government crimes must be balanced by fawning displays of patriotism. Affleck even entertained US troops aboard the USS Enterprise on a USO-sponsored tour of the Persian Gulf in December 2003, despite his reservations about US warmongering (no doubt mock-firing a missile at Iran from the US

naval base in Bahrain).

The CIA-cum-Hollywood producer of the movie-within-the-movie is another icon of anti-war liberals, Alan Arkin, who starred in “The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming” (1966), directed by Norman Jewison, and the screen version of the satirical anti-war *Catch-22* (1970). However, he also did an HBO TV movie “Doomsday Gun” (1994) about a Canadian weapons builder whom helped Israel ‘defend’ the Golan Heights, but then cynically decides to sell his talents to the highest bidder — Saddam Hussein, who wants to build the eponymous weapon-of-mass-deception (excuse me, ‘destruction’). Arkin plays an Israeli intelligence officer who politely changes the misguided Canadian’s mind. No doubt Bush junior saw this nuanced bit of *hasbara*, prompting him to invade Iraq in search of WMDs.

“Argo” was received with raves and calls for an Oscar for Arkin. His past displays of anti-war liberalism should not be a problem, given his devotion to Israel as shown in “Doomsday Gun” and now this latest sop to America’s Israel-firsters.

The timing of this screening of the fantasy Canadian embassy intrigue must have been coordinated with the real-life Canadian embassy closing. There’s no other explanation. Worthy of an Oscar in itself. In sharp contrast to the scandal at the 2009 Toronto festival. Despite Israel’s invasion of Gaza just months earlier, it featured a ‘City to city Spotlight on Tel Aviv’, funded by the Israeli Embassy and the Canada-Israel Cultural Foundation, the centre-piece of Israeli Consul Amir Gissin’s “Brand Israel” campaign. At the time, Gissin unashamedly was calling Toronto “an arena for Israel from a PR, cultural and commercial point of view”. The idea was “to promote Tel Aviv as a city of peace”, even after killing more than a thousand Gazans in Operation Cast Lead a few short months earlier.

TIFF’s cozying up to the Israeli propaganda machine blew up into a global scandal, as a spontaneous movement of protest among a few filmmakers turned into an international incident, bringing 1,500 signatures from prominent Israeli public figures and the likes of Jane Fonda, Julie Christie, Alice Walker, Naomi Klein, Guy Maddin, and Harry Belafonte to the “Toronto Declaration” criticizing Israel and TIFF. It was a huge embarrassment, a sign that Israel propaganda is becoming harder to swallow, even by devotees of Hollywood.

Since then, no more tributes to Tel Aviv. Now, to show how open-minded it is, TIFF even shows Arab films tsk-tsking Israel’s mistreatment of Palestinians, but all safely within the bounds of North American discourse on Palestine, Syria etc. This year’s include:

*“After the Battle”, by Egyptian Yousry Nasrallah, about Mahmoud, who makes a paltry living taking tourists on horseback rides at the pyramids but was conned into participating in the “battle of the camels” during the Egyptian revolution last year. He is now unemployed and ostracized, and has a fateful encounter with a liberal rich divorcee from Zamalek.

*“As if We Were Catching a Cobra”, by Hala Alabdalla, about the tradition of caricature drawing in Egypt and Syria, filmed before, during and after the uprisings of 2011-12.

*“Inescapable”, by Arab-Canadian director Ruba Nadda, about a former officer in the Syrian military police who is forced to return to Damascus when his globe-trotting daughter goes missing.

*“Fidai” and “Zabana!”, celebrating the 50th anniversary of Algeria’s independence, the former reminiscences of a combatant, the latter a biopic about the legendary freedom fighter guillotined by the French in 1956 who inspired the Battle of Algiers.

*"The Attack", by Lebanese director Ziad Doueiri, about a Palestinian doctor in Israel who faces discrimination and whose wife is involved in a suicide bombing.

"When I Saw You", by Palestinian Annemarie Jacir, produced by Ossama Bawardi, who produced "Paradise Now".

*"A World Not Ours", by Mahdi Fleifel, about life in the Ain al-Helweh Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon.

*"State 194", a documentary by Dan Setton, on Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's plans for a Palestinian state, with Fayyad in attendance.

*"Inch' Allah", by Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, about a Quebec doctor who works in a women's health clinic on the Palestinian side of the barrier but resides in an apartment on the Israeli side.

Uprisings against Arab dictators, celebration of Algerian independence, Palestinian angst balanced by a paean to the chief Palestinian sellout.

As another sign of the times, there is now an annual Toronto Palestine Film Festival (TPFF) following TIFF at the beginning of October, where more probing films are shown and where Palestinian filmmakers invited to TIFF (this year — Jacir, Bawardi and Fleifel) can meet with local activists fighting Israeli apartheid.

This year's line-up includes some hard-hitting documentaries:

*"The War Around Us", by Abdallah Omeish, about the Israeli invasion of Gaza in 2008.

*"Road Map to Apartheid", by Ana Nogueira.

*"This Is My Land...Hebron", by Giulia Amati and Stephen Natanson, about Hebron, where 160,000 Palestinians are confronted by an Israeli settlement of 600 settlers, guarded by 2,000 Israeli soldiers, intent on expelling the indigenous population and occupying their homes.

If patrons of TPFF have their way, Toronto may not be Gissin's "arena for Israeli PR" much longer.

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Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-

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