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Middle East Fireside Chats with Leaders from the Region

Amos Yadlin, President and Founder, MIND Israel; Former Head of Military Intelligence of Israel

Moderator: David Ignatius, Columnist, *The Washington Post*

Discussion recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6NyHOgPVcY>

David Ignatius

So I'm going to start off for people who don't know Amos with two words and dates, and I'm going to let him explain why they're important in understanding who Amos Yadlin is. The first is Osirak, 1981 and the second is Al Kibar 2007 I believe. And if you'd explain why briefly, why each is important, both for you and the State of Israel.

Amos Yadlin

Okay, in 2008 Vice President Cheney came to visit Israel, and Defense Minister Barak invited him to a dinner and invite me as the chief intelligence of Israel. And he basically introduced me as you did. This is the only gentleman that participated in destroying two nuclear programs that threatened to destroy Israel. So Cheney said, Amos, one to go. So when I left the intelligence, I said to my successor, it is your job. I'm now going to another war, but Israel is facing existential threat, not from the Palestinians, from the rest of the Arab and Muslim world. This should be remembered. The last half an hour was only on Israel and Palestine. But to make the record straight, Israel and the Palestinians reach an agreement with the PLO, the PLO violated the agreement by an Intifada in 2000 that killed 1500 Israelis led by Yasser Arafat and then, and then Hamas took over in Gaza. Hamas is a terror organization that not accepted the PLO principles because the Europeans asked them to say, Swissy, we recognize Israel, we denounce terror and we recognize the agreement between Israel and the PLO. Of course, Hamas refused and broke the Friends of Salam Fayyad from the Fatah, from the roofs of Gaza. So the idea to bring Hamas into the PA is a bad idea, unless they will recognize, they will accept the three demands, not Israel demands, protect us, us, us Russia, and they don't remember who is the peace. So it is not that simple. It is not that simple.

David Ignatius

So go back to the beginning of a nightmare that we've been living through for nine months, the events of October 7, which are still sharply engraved, I think, on everybody's minds, but it's always worth going back to the beginning of the story. So I want to ask you almost what your own memories are of that day when you heard the news of what was happening, your reactions to it. And then the question that haunts you, I know haunts Israelis, how could this possibly have happened to such a strong country with such a good intelligence service that it was surprised and initially overwhelmed on October 7.

Amos Yadlin

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On October 6, we have a memorial day for 50 years of Yom Kippur. I was a young pilot, maybe the youngest that flew on Yom Kippur. So we decided my class in flight school to have a meeting in my home and speaking about Yom Kippur war. And we insist that it will be not only drinking and eating and some substance. So some of us spoke about the intelligence failure. Another spoke about the operational challenge of coping with the Russian missile to ground groundwater missiles. And one was a prisoner of war. So we spoke about what is the meaning of being prisoner of four midnight, everybody went home. I did the dishes until one o'clock I went to sleep, and I wake up after five hours and 29 minutes to something that's worse than Yom Kipur as a national failure. And you asked me about the failure, it's a trilateral failure. It's an intelligence failure because the Israeli intelligence should give the IDF the Early Warning, the early warning that Hamas is going to attack. And then it was an operational failure, because the Southern Command should be ready if there is no intelligence wake up call. And it is a political failure. It was the Prime Minister of Israel who didn't want to negotiate with Salam Fayyad, who didn't want to go on a political plaque, and he preferred the terrorist in Gaza. He allowed Qatar to give them a lot of money to build the military that, according to the agreement between Israel and the PLO, any Palestinian territory should be demilitarized. And what happened in Gaza, they built the military, and this military attacked Israel. So I was never thought that such a failure can happen. I was a head of intelligence 14 years ago, and the intelligence become even better since then. Maybe they thought that they know everything. This is the they haven't picked the signals from the knowledge and then the noise. So this is the intelligence failure. I at the end of this day, the end of this day, I should go back to history, Yom Kipur, I already spoke about it. Surprised at that. I went back to the War of Independence, which Israel was attacked by seven Arab countries. This was my teacher in first grade. I opened I become a little bit more educated. I asked myself throughout the seven countries, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the Iraqis were in the West Bank. The teacher said, Yemen and Saudi okay, they have an explanatory force to Egypt. But I also went back to the very raison d'etre of the State of Israel, the holocaust that Israelis and Jews will not be killed in their home, in the beds, will not be burned, will not be beheaded, will not be raped. And this is the day that since the Auschwitz chevenis have stopped walking on the Holocaust. Israelis, Jews were killed in the highest number. And I knew the families. I have a daughter who is a male. She mentor somebody to one in the elections that should happen at the end of October. Wonderful woman, young woman, I saw her in my daughter who wonderful husband, two twins and a daughter. The funeral was for the whole family. I saw all the coffins. So the killing of my other daughter is a clinical psychologist, and she is treating a woman that went into a shelter from the party. She was in the shelter with 15 other people. The terrorist kills them one by one with hand grenades and shooting. She was the only one protected by the bodies laid there for five hours until she was rescued. And now my little daughter, who is a professional now, has to treat her. So this is a trauma that I think nobody can understand. Israel after the seventh of October is a different Israel. And if we were security paranoid before, we will be much more in the future, much more and Hamas will be destroyed to the level that they cannot have a military anymore and cannot repeat the seventh of October once again.

David Ignatius

So thank you. Thank you for sharing that with such powerful detail. We'll all remember that I know. So I want to ask you about the war that has followed, which has now lasted for nine months. And I want you

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to put on your military intelligence and assessment hat and give us a situation report on where things stand now after nine months, how degraded has Hamas been, how successful has the IDF been in executing its military plan? What would you say about where we are and what's left to do?

Amos Yadlin

Yeah, I think first, David, we should go out of Gaza, because we started with Gaza. The next day, Nasrallah started to shoot in the north, then the Houthis, then the militia in Iraq, then Iran. So if I were the National Security Advisor, I would say to the Prime Minister, it's time to re define the goals of the war. You will not kill the last Hamas terrorist, as people are saying, you are not you replace a terrorist idea with another idea. It's not our job. We cannot do it. Hamas was degraded from a military that can operate against Israel to a level of insurgency terror groups, and they are in a very bad shape, very bad shape. The whole command and control was destroyed. Many of the battalions and the brigades commanders are not there in as a matter of fact, they are now pushing Sinwar to stop the war. So this is a military insurgency. I would like to bring them to a level of a crime gang, but they are somewhere between these two. But redefine the goals of the war is saying first, bring back the hostages. Bring back the hostages. There is six or five female soldiers at the age of 18 to 21 the other females, the Hamas, decided that every Israeli between 19 to 55 is a soldier. I spoke about my daughter. She has her best friend, a yoga teacher never served in the IDF. She is now in Hamas, nine months, night after night. Who knows what's happening there. So bringing back the hostages is a national duty. Those who failed on the seventh of October need to bring them back home. And then define Hamas is not anymore Israel to Israel, and the third goal should be bring back this destroyed kibbutzim to be the most advanced, prosperous region of Israel. This will be my goals. If there is ceasefire, if there is a hostage, there is ceasefire in the south, which important also to the innocent people in Gaza that Sinwar doesn't care about, but I care about them, and they deserve a ceasefire. There will be a ceasefire in the north. It is not me assessing it. Nasrallah said, I'm helping Sinwar so he will stop. Then you spoke with Salam Fayyad on the normalization. It still can happen. It still can happen. I thought that the deadline was June, but my friends in Washington are saying we still can make and then the coalition against Iran that we saw so efficiently and very impressively stopping the largest barrage of ballistic missiles in the history of military in of military history. This all can be a strategic victory for Israel, instead of dreaming on some absolute victories that, unfortunately, my Prime Minister is trying to sell to his people, and this is the time to say enough is enough with Gaza, bring back these people. It's important to our national unity and sense of security and start to solve the strategic problem that this war created.

David Ignatius

So people are speaking frankly on this panel today, and I want to ask you for your Frank assessment of your Prime Minister. You've known and worked with Prime Minister Netanyahu for decades. You know him as well as anyone in Israel. Give us your assessment of his performance as prime minister and his current position, or non position, on the ceasefire.

Amos Yadlin

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I'm not used to criticize my Prime Minister outside of my country. However, anybody can read what I'm publishing, would Bibi Netanyahu retired in 2019 he would enter history as one of the most successful Prime Ministers of Israel. The economy was in great shape, the Israeli military, the Israeli intelligence, the Israeli high tech. And he could wait one day serving long and Ben Gurion and quit. Now, unfortunately, is going to enter history as one of the worst Prime Ministers of Israel, and this is because what he have done with his right wing government since January 2023, trying to undermine Israel democracy, and then the war since seven of October. And once again, if I was his advisor, say, Prime Minister, you are very much sensitive to history. Your father was an historian. Your legacy is in a big, big trouble, but try to improve it. Try to improve it by ending the war, bring back the hostages, do a deal with the Saudis, and he will get a support. He will get a support from the opposition, from Lapid and Ganz they will give him some political safety net with a demand for coming election, a close election, but this can improve in a way, his entrance into the history, not as he's entering now as we speak.

David Ignatius

So you spoke earlier about then Vice President Cheney saying after almost literally dropped the bomb that destroyed the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak, and also led the decision to attack the Syrian reactor. And as Cheney said, You've got one nuclear program left in Iran. So I want to ask you about the clock that's ticking with Iran. Iran has stepped up its rate of enrichment of fissionable material. Some Iranian leaders who before held back from saying that this had a military dimension. Are now more or less admitting it. I want to ask you, almost where you think this is heading, is Iran going to sneak out, break out, and have actual nuclear capability if they restart their weapons program they haven't done? Will Israel know, and will the United States know? And do you think it's possible that they'll just be just before the starting line as a pre nuclear state, and will Israel accept that?

Amos Yadlin

Thank you, David, for the question. You know, being a fighter pilot in 81 was a risk, but the risk was mine. Okay, being the head of intelligence in 2007 I was responsible for much more than myself. It was my nation, my country, and when we found the North Korean nuclear reactor, and I came to Prime Minister olmert Say here what we found, he asked me three questions, when it will be hot? Because you are not attacking a hot reactor. It is Chernobyl. You don't want to do it. How much time do I have before it will be hot? And what Assad will do if we will attack it? Remember, it's one year after the second Lebanese war, the Prime Minister was very worried that we will go to another war. So in the first two questions, I gave him a very precise answer, because it's in generical questions. We look at the reactor. It was a North Korean. We knew that it's only to produce nuclear plutonium for nuclear weapons. On how much time do we have, they need to cool it with water from the afar river. So I asked the engineers, I said, to build this pump station on the afro river six months. So I told the president, you have forms and what Assad will do. How can I know? So looking into the future, you don't have crystal ball you. It's all depends on the decision of a supreme leader or Assad. And then I'm not saying why we are paying you such a big budget, and you cannot tell me what Assad will do. Excuse me, Prime Minister, I'm sitting with you. I'm from your team, the blue team. You the Prime Minister, the defense minister, the foreign minister, Chief of Staff, Heather, Mossad and myself, small group, we discussed something, and I have no idea what you

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will decide. So Assad even don't know that. We have found this very, very secret. The defense minister, have no idea. The Syria defense minister, the Chief of Staff, have no idea. Only his small, black gang. He don't know that we found it, and they have no idea that we're attacking it. So even I will produce the best chip that can read what people think, and my agent will put it in his bed, and it will transmit through satellites to television to my headquarter, I will not have the answer, because he's not thinking about anyway to your question. So that's a good bit of history, therefore. So the Iranians of the US and its disengagement from the Middle East due to the war that Israel is in gravity, maybe it is the time to break out to the bomb. So to your question, for a nuclear bomb, you need three ingredients, enrich uranium, a platform to launch it, a missile, and the weapon itself, the bomb, the two firsts they have, they already accumulate enough fossil material in 60% for eight or nine bombs, and they can convert it to 90% within 10 days. So it's behind us. And if I were the head of intelligence today, or if I will speak with my friend, Bill Berns, I will recommend concentrate on the organization group, and it is your highest priority to find whether the Supreme Leader have said to himself, I fired 300 missiles to Israel. I invested a lot of money in it, and somehow the Israelis, with the help of very white coalition, stopped it may be at a time to go to the bomb, so look very carefully at this weapon group and be very much ready if needed to eliminate it. And this is also my advice to whoever the next prime minister of Israel, whoever the next president of America, agree between the two of you, don't fight over JCPOA or other agreement. Make agreement as two partners that don't want to see a nuclear Iran. And this is the policy of, if I remember right four last American president say Iran will not have a nuclear bomb, so let's do an agreement between the two of us. How we stop them? What is our red lines? What is the strategy? What is the operation? Be ready. Because I have a concern that Iran looking at what's going on on the global stage, having Russia and China behind them, which was not the case a decade ago, they may break out the bomb.

David Ignatius

So I have one more question. Then this time, I am going to turn to the rising leaders for a question from them. This is a tough question to ask an Israeli, but I think it's an important one. You served in the Israeli Air Force for decades. You know its rules of engagement. Why have civil Palestinian civilian casualties in this war been so high. I've watched wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and I know how the United States struggles with this problem, not always successfully, but I need to be honest, the level of civilian casualties seems beyond what a good air force should achieve. How did this happen?

Amos Yadlin

Numbers matters. If you saw Americans in Afghanistan, if you saw American in Mosul and Raqqa, the numbers are even higher, even higher. So go back to your numbers and check them again. But I will not avoid answering your question. The people to blame about the number of casualties are the leadership of Hamas. They choose to locate their command posts, shelters, observation posts, rockets, launching, not in the battlefield, una sites, schools, hospitals. They are using their own citizens to put Israel in the wrong place that Israel is. They're using them as a human shield. They using them as a materials for Tiktok. That's you have to blame Sinwar from A to Z Israel trying to avoid collateral damage. And if you were in Iraq, you know that the Americans have 01235, collateral, five is you want to kill one terrorist. Five, innocent. So our rules of engagement are lower than that, lower than that, unless Hamas is doing

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what they are doing. So blame Hamas from A to Z. Blame Hamas for the nine months of the war, because he could stop the war after two weeks, after months, if he would put the hostages on a pickup truck and bring them not to Israel, to the Egyptians, to the Qataris, the war would be over. So Sinwar is to blame, and I'm not going to take any of the blame on the Israeli military. Let me finish with you say that anybody that use that deal with the Middle East should be a pessimist. I'm not a pessimist. When I was chief of intelligence, I used to also brief President of Israel, President Peres once tell Amos, you always come with some scenarios that are a source of concern. Be optimist because the optimists and the pessimists are dying the same, but live differently. So and once again, Fayyad and myself, if you put the two of us in a room, we can agree on 90% how to solve the Israeli Palestinian position conflict, however, Fayyad, unfortunately, is not representing the Palestinian 75% of the Palestinians in the West Bank supporting the massacre of the seven of October. This is a real problem, a real problem. But after Yom Kippur War, it was a very tough war. Five years later, Sadat came to Jerusalem and said, no more war, no more bloodshed. And Prime Minister Begin who planned to live after retirement in Sinai, gave him the whole area. So I'm waiting five years from now for an Israeli Sadat, for a Palestinian Sadat, and let's hope that the awful wall will lead to a peace.

David Ignatius

So I hear hear. the idea of you and Salam Fayyad in a room together that encouraged me. So is there one brave young Yes, yes, please.

Audience question

Earlier, you mentioned that you believe Israel should withdraw from Gaza. In that case, what would happen to the Philadelphia corridor. Israel previously relied on Egypt to secure it, and while it was aware that it was somewhat porous, I think has been surprised by the extent to how porous it has been under Egypt. How could Israel withdraw troops and expose the Philadelphi corridor again?

David Ignatius

Good question.

Amos Yadlin

Yeah. Let remind those who are not in the history, we have withdraw from Gaza Salam. Know we have withdraw from the last inch of Gaza to the 7067 border Sharon, dismantle all the settlement, which show you what the meaning of leadership if you decide to do a step forward. And in Philadelphi, there was a un European group that should inspect it, they fail. They fail. So Israel has no desire to go back to Gaza. And as long as the issue of demilitarization will be solved, let's say, by partnership with the Egyptians, with the we can build an underground wall, as we did on the Israeli border. Hamas haven't entered Israel through underground tunnel. None of them the underground obstacle was very efficient, and some sensors have cooperation between Israel, US and Egypt. We don't have to be in Philadelphi, but this cooperation and plan should be agreed before we withdrew, to make sure that Hamas will not rebuild itself.

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David Ignatius

So I want to thank Amos for again like Salaam Fayyad being frank about enormously difficult, important things. Thank you so much. Amos.