

Israel's Greatest Enemy: Iran, or Overconfidence?



Headed north?

Photographer: Jack Guez/AFP/Getty Images

On the wall of Amos Yadlin's office at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, there is a framed Time magazine cover displaying an F-16A fighter jet — the plane Yadlin flew in 1981 when, as one of eight Israeli pilots, he destroyed Saddam Hussein's nuclear reactor.

The attack, dubbed Operation Opera, was a milestone in 40-year career in which Yadlin flew more than 250 combat missions and went on to serve as deputy commander of the Air Force, military attaché in Washington, and, for five years, head of Israeli military intelligence. He retired in 2010 with the rank of major general.

Next to the Time cover hangs a master's degree from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. "When I arrived in Cambridge, my English was elementary," he says. "I picked it up as I went along."

Yadlin isn't a professional politician, but he is the scion of a prestigious Labor Party family (his father Aharon served as education minister under Golda Meir and Yitzhak Rabin). In the 2015 election, Labor made him its candidate for defense minister. The party lost, but Yadlin remains its senior security expert, and would accept the defense portfolio in a future coalition government. "I would serve under any Zionist prime minister who shares my views and goals," he told me.

Yadlin will enunciate those views and goals at the end of January, at the INSS annual conference in Tel Aviv, where he customarily delivers an influential national security assessment. Here is a preview:

Let's begin with Iran: Israel and the U.S. reportedly signed a joint-strategy approach in mid-December. What does it entail?

It created working groups to pursue shared goals: to prevent Iran from acquiring the capability to get and use a nuclear weapon; to combine U.S. and Israeli intelligence to monitor Iranian compliance; to prepare a reaction if Iran does violate the terms of the nuclear deal it signed; and to frustrate Iranian efforts to reach hegemony in the Middle East.

I've been calling for these working groups since 2015. I regret that it took two and a half years, but better late than never.

You don't oppose the nuclear deal itself?

I differentiate between the short run and the long run. In the short run, we are better off. The Iranians were two months from the bomb. They are now one year away and they will stay there for at least two-thirds of the life of the agreement. In the long run, however, the Israeli government opposing the deal makes sense. It ultimately gives Iran legitimacy for a full-scale nuclear program, putting them zero distance from the bomb. This is not a matter of opinion. President Barack Obama admitted it. At the very least, the sunset clause in the deal has to be fixed to prevent this.

You have written that Israel must be capable of unilaterally stopping an Iranian breakout. That sounds a lot like Operation Opera, or am I mistaken?

You are correct, but only after exhausting all other options, as a final resort.

Does Israel really have the operational capability to do this?

I don't intend to discuss Israel's capabilities in detail, so I will answer in one word: Yes.

And the will?

Israel has a core principle. People call it the Begin Doctrine. We will not allow a country that openly declares it wants to destroy Israel obtain the weapons to do so.

Israel's other strategic concern is a possible war against Hezbollah.

Not just Hezbollah. We have to prepare not for a third war in Lebanon but for the first "northern war," one that will be fought not only against Hezbollah, but Syria and Iranians in Syria, all along the northern front...

And perhaps in Gaza as well?

Gaza is not that dangerous. The northern front is what matters.

Israeli generals seem very confident. They talk in terms of winning in a couple weeks or less. Do you share this confidence?

Yes. Israel has a better air force, better intelligence, and it has learned the lesson of previous wars and implemented them. This time, for example, it will not differentiate between Hezbollah and Lebanon. And if Bashar al-Assad joins the fighting, he could well lose everything he has gained, with Russian help, over the past two years.

But Israel will pay a price, too. Hezbollah has received advanced weapons from Iran and a lot of military experience in the Syrian civil war.

Yes, we will pay a higher price than we did during the Lebanon war of 2006, especially on the home front. Israel has developed a very effective defensive shield built on several layers and dimensions, including the world's best missile-defense system. We have intelligence capabilities that will allow us to destroy some long-range rockets on their launch pads. We can also mitigate damage with an early warning system that will give civilians a couple minutes to reach shelter.

But there will be a substantial damage.

How do you expect the public to react?

Israelis are resilient. But they are also critical. There is an asymmetrical balance of expectations on both sides. They want the Israeli Defense Forces to protect them 100 percent, to win the war in six days, and to force the other side to raise a white flag of surrender.

This will never happen. If we measure the score of the next war like a basketball game, Israel will win 99 to 19. Hezbollah will declare a divinely inspired victory. Israelis will complain and will nominate a committee to investigate the failure.

You mentioned the Russians in Syria. How will their presence affect Israeli calculations?

When I was a young pilot, in the 1970s, Russian military advisors in Egypt fired on Israeli airplanes over the Suez Canal. Today, we are no longer enemies. We have an excellent deconfliction mechanism with the Russians, and good relations overall. We understand one another.

In previous wars, the IDF has been stopped by the U.S. after a certain period of time.

That happened in the 20th century. Back then, we always had the feeling that we were being stopped short of victory. But in the last two wars, in which lasted 33 days in Lebanon and 50 days in Gaza, the U.S. didn't stop the fighting — they gave us all the time we needed. Actually, we would have been better off if we had stopped the wars earlier.

In any case, we can't count on external restraint. We ourselves have to plan before the war how and when to end it with maximum achievements and minimum losses. We need to discuss all this before the war with the Americans. That's one reason why the working groups are so important. Once war begins, talking becomes more difficult.

Saudi Arabia is part of the regional picture. It has its own issues with Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Syria. There is a new crown prince there now, Mohammed bin Salman. What do you expect from him?

He faces serious challenges. The price of oil is around \$60 a barrel. Saudi Arabia needs \$100 a barrel for economic stability, and it is losing foreign currency reserves at a rate of about \$100 billion a year. It has to diversify its economy.

It also has to modernize society. Saudi Arabia isn't a closed nation like North Korea. More than 100,000 Saudis study abroad. They see the modern world. The country also has very impressive internet penetration. And 70 percent of the population is under 30 years of age. This is a generation that expects change. But a lot of people don't like change. He will face obstacles. I hope he can succeed.

Is Israel helping him?

This is a tricky question. Let me put it this way: I'm not aware of open cooperation. But I'm sure that covertly, since we have so many common interests, it would not be surprising if there is intelligence cooperation and maybe even more.

You have written that progress with the Palestinian issue is a key to relations with Saudi Arabia. Why is that?

We need to convince our allies, including our new potential Arab allies, that Israel intends to honor its policy of a two-state solution. This isn't a matter of merely going through the motions. We need to show good faith by helping the Palestinians build national institutions and infrastructure, and so demonstrate feasibility. For example, the Palestinians worry about territorial continuity. Why not build a highway that links Jenin in the north with Hebron in the south, where they can drive without ever encountering an Israeli checkpoint? That is one example. There are others.

So you favor a Palestinian state to help Israel deepen its relations with the Arab world?

Yes, but for an even more important reason. We need it. The Israeli ship is heading for a demographic iceberg. I'm not hysterical on this point, like the Israeli left. Gaza, for example, is not part of my demographic calculation. And I do believe in future large-scale Jewish immigration. Still, we can't afford to keep a huge Palestinian population in the West Bank under our permanent control.

The Israel I believe in is based on four core principles: It must be secure. It must

be Jewish. It must be democratic. And it must be just. A two-state solution can satisfy all four of those principles. We have to keep this option open even if we can't reach it today. And we have to show our allies that we are serious.

At the same time you want to keep military control of the Jordan River valley, the settlements blocs and Jerusalem. How is this different from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's "statehood-minus" offer to the Palestinians?

Netanyahu is on the record as supporting a two-state solution, but he is dragged to the right by his coalition partners, extremists who want to foreclose on compromise. We can keep what's important to us in Jerusalem, for example, without incorporating Palestinian suburbs and villages that have nothing to do with our interests in the city.

Trump has promised to offer his "ultimate deal" for Middle East peace in early 2018. Any idea what's in it?

They haven't leaked anything. As an Israeli, I'm praying that it will be a success. As an analyst, I think the chances for a final deal are close to zero. But if Trump can come up with something that is good enough for now — an arrangement that preserves Israeli security, enables Palestinian state-building from the bottom up, and demonstrates to our Arab allies that we are sincere — he will deserve a Nobel Prize. The rest of the unbridgeable parameters he can leave for future generations to solve.

Here's an early look at the national security assessment you intend to deliver at the INSS conference at the end of January: "Over the past decade, Israel has succeeded in adapting well to the changing reality of the Middle East, strengthening itself militarily and politically, and maneuvering in a manner that has prevented serious clashes and wars." That decade coincides with the Netanyahu era. You and he are political opponents. How much credit does he really deserve?

I give him some of the credit. But being strong militarily is not enough. What is his vision for Israel in the long run? I expect a leader to identify opportunities and take advantage of them. There is a president in the White House who is closer to the Israeli narrative than the Palestinian narrative, and wants to help. We have close relations with Arab states who were once our enemies. This is a window of

opportunity, and someone has to make use of it. He isn't doing that. Bibi is right when he says that Iran is our major challenge. OK, if we move forward on the Palestinian issue, which is the right thing to do in any case, it can help us solidify an alliance with the U.S. and the pragmatic Arab states against Iran.

A lot of Israelis will agree with your assessment of the balance of power. The country feels strong and prosperous. But maybe we are overconfident, as we were before the 1973 Yom Kippur War?

I see it differently. Before that war we were blinded by arrogance. It is a lesson we haven't forgotten. It doesn't mean that nothing can surprise us — but our intelligence, both strategic and tactical, is far more professional today than it has ever been. They say a pessimist is an optimist with experience. I've had quite a lot of experience in my life, but I'm still an optimist about this country and its future.

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