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## **Interview of Amos Yadlin**

**By Eyal Levy, Ma'ariv**

- When experts at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) were in the process of preparing a strategic forecast for 2018 last year, they cited the possibilities of a military conflagration in the north with the Iranians and in the south with Hamas. Regrettably, there hasn't been a "happy end" here.
- "To a certain extent, there's a paradox here," said Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Yadlin, the director of the INSS. "Israel, in its seventy-year existence, is currently at one of its strongest points. It has a military advantage. It has an alliance unlike any before with the White House. It has good relations with the other world powers, two stable peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan and informal relations with the Sunni Arab world. A firm geopolitical strategic status. On the other hand, it hasn't solved its central security problems: the threat from Iran, a regional power that calls for our destruction, and the bleeding conflict with the Palestinians. We pointed to the fact that the chances of conflict on those fronts is higher than it was in previous years, despite our strength. We saw that with the victory in the civil war in Syria, Iran has begun to allocate budgets and troops to building advanced military capabilities against us. That resoluteness has encountered an Israeli resoluteness that does not intend to let that happen. When you see strategic trends act against one another, that is a potential clash."
- Yadlin has a long security record. As a combat pilot he amassed more than 4,200 flight hours, carried out some 250 operational sorties over enemy territory, commanded elite flight squadrons and served in a number of senior capacities in the Israel Air Force. His last position in the army was director of the IDF Intelligence Branch. The Second Lebanon War, the operation in which the Syrian nuclear reactor was bombed and Operation Cast Lead were all prosecuted while he was the director of the IDF Intelligence Branch. He was party to the intensive discussions about stopping the Iranian nuclear program. "I don't intend to discuss the details of the discussions, but an attack was one of the options that were examined," said Maj. Gen. (res.) Yadlin. "The strategic objective, the paramount [objective], was stopping Iran from going nuclear. Had that been possible either by means of a better agreement than the one that was reached or by means of changing the Iranians' calculations, such as painful sanctions that prove that there is a price to [acquiring] a nuclear bomb, or by means of regime change over there—that would have been better. There are a lot of strategies that should be adopted before attacking. Israel prepared itself for the military option."

The army and the security branches presented a plan that allowed a [military] course of action but, to the best of my knowledge, that issue never was put to a cabinet discussion.”

- **Q: How is an assessment about the likelihood of war prepared? “When you stand at the head of an intelligence organization, there are questions that you can answer with a high degree of certainty. Questions that pertain to troop numbers and the performance of weapons systems: what is the missile’s range, what is the weight of the explosives it carries, and how many centrifuges are spinning at a specific site in Iran. If you have good sources you can present an accurate assessment to the political echelon—what’s known as a ‘capabilities assessment.’ There is another issue in intelligence that’s known as an ‘intentions assessment.’ What will a future leader decide to do in a certain situation. Here you need to be more cautious. After the Yom Kippur War there were intelligence officials who argued that intelligence [organizations] must not deal with intentions, only capabilities. In my opinion, that is a mistaken approach. If we deal only in capabilities, we’ll need to deploy the entire army, including the reserves, on all the borders and to raise the Arrow missiles so that they’re ready to fire at any given moment. The intelligence [services] have to assess intentions in order to allow for normal life here.”**
- **Q: Lessons of the Second Lebanon War? “Lessons of the ten years since the war in which we haven’t operated against Hizbullah’s buildup. Since 2006 we have experienced 12 years of quiet that was achieved as a result of a war that came under harsh criticism, but which achieved a strategic deterrence that had not been achieved in any [other] war in the country’s history.”**
- **Q: Are we dealing correctly with the Iranian threat? “Israel has the most advanced defensive array against ballistic missiles and rockets in the world, but there is no hermetic response to the threat. The Iranians are liable to try their hand at building an array of accurate missiles in Lebanon as well, and that is a challenge that we might encounter later this year. There will be a dilemma then: do we allow that array to be built or do we apply the Begin doctrine?”**
- **Q: Just how much more complicated is an attack in Iran than the operations that were carried out in Iraq and Syria? “The challenge of stopping Iran is far more complex. It is farther away, and a larger country. The Iranians learned the lessons of the previous Israeli attacks, spread out their nuclear program in a number of sites and they defend them better. It is important to be coordinated with the United States, which shares with us the same goal: for Iran not to obtain nuclear**

weapons. That is an objective that we had with Obama's administration and certainly with the Trump administration."

- When one discusses the northern and southern fronts with Yadlin, he immediately asks that a distinction be drawn between them. "The north is tens of times more dangerous," he said. "Without diminishing the fact that Hamas and other terror organizations can disrupt daily life in the Gaza area, Israel has found good solutions to the strategic threats. Most of the rockets are intercepted by the best defense system in the world and, while you and I are talking, the IDF is discovering and demolishing tunnels. Will Hamas nevertheless decide to opt for conflagration? Israel has capabilities. If we decide to bring about its collapse, we know how to do that."
- Q: By conquering the Gaza Strip? "We always tend to opt for the extreme solutions. Either we operate only from the air or we have to conquer the entire Gaza Strip. There are many military actions that can be used to bring about the collapse of Hamas's regime without conquering the Gaza Strip. The problem, in my opinion, is the government's decision not to bring about the collapse of Hamas[s regime]. That declaration has given that organization a lot of leverage against us. I proposed in 2014, and I propose today, to opt for powerful and painful actions that are likely to bring about the organization's collapse. There's no reason to be frightened of doing that. Air and ground operations that will exact a painful price from Hamas and will jeopardize its rule. A combination of targeted killing operations and a serious blow to its military wing and command posts. A ground operation to central Hamas strongholds. A long list of measures that were not taken in the past. We implemented an important decision when we disengaged from the Gaza Strip, but the mistake that was made by the government was that even in Operation Protective Edge and in discussions that are held today they say: we want a responsible address in Gaza and we want a weakened and deterred Hamas. And if it weren't sufficiently weakened? Then it operates against us in a way that mandates another round [of fighting]. Hamas needs to know that if it crosses red lines we will act and we won't regret it if it falls [from power]."
- Q: Could we have finished the job in Operation Protective Edge? "I described Operation Protective Edge back in 2014 as a strategic tie. Hamas is a relatively weak terror organization that held the country under fire for weeks on end. That happened because of mistaken assumptions. That Hamas wanted a cease-fire at any given moment, no matter what. And a second assumption, that we mustn't

make it fall [from power]. We didn't use our aerial and ground strength and capabilities to make it beg for a cease-fire much earlier."

- Q: Is a dialogue possible with Hamas? "Anything that can be achieved by means of political dialogue is always preferable to a dialogue between cannons. But in the past Hamas demanded more concessions for a hudna than Abu Mazen wanted for a final status arrangement. We can hold indirect negotiations with it, but once we reach the parameters of an agreement I anticipate that the negotiations will quickly become derailed. The issue of the Israeli civilians and the bodies of the missing soldiers that are in its possession will be the first to come up. Israel is demanding their release and is prepared to pay a price, but not what Hamas is demanding. That gap will be hard to bridge, and that's why the chances of an agreement are low. Israel is prepared to give a lot for Gaza's rehabilitation, provided the organization demilitarizes the Gaza Strip. I assess that there is no chance that Hamas will agree to disarm. And even if we assume that Israel only demands that it not build up [its military strength] further, here too I don't see any chance that it will agree. I'm not against a hudna, but if one gets into the details one realizes that the chance is low."
- Q: The situation in Gaza is catastrophic. "The humanitarian situation is problematic, and we need to address it first and foremost from a moral position. There is a large public in Gaza that isn't to blame for the fact that Hamas controls it. It is important to do so morally, but also for utilitarian reasons. What happens in Gaza doesn't stay there. Diseases, sewage and a despairing public that makes its way to the border in the end. We have to find a way to help without that effort strengthening Hamas. Today any support for the civilians in Gaza serves Hamas to build its [military] strength. Israel won't tolerate over time a situation in which, on the one hand, it helps the civilians while, on the other, there are kites that are burning its fields. Perhaps a 'small hudna' that is instated by the Egyptians and the Europeans will be possible. It's our obligation to examine it, but without any illusions and with open eyes."
- Q: What is our strategy at present? Do we even have one? "The point of departure is that Gaza is a hostile entity that we disengaged from and which we formally are not responsible for the turn of events in it. The only strategy that I can discern in the government is 'quiet in exchange for quiet.' That doesn't solve the fundamental problems, and that's why at the very least efforts need to be made to reduce the chance of a round of belligerence every three years. In the long term, a solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict needs to be sought by means of linking Gaza to the West Bank. The government today isn't eager about

that linkage. It's convenient for it to handle the two parts of the Palestinian problem separately."

- **Q: Do you see a solution on the horizon? "With the current leadership on both sides it's going to be hard to bridge the gaps. The conflict is going to be with us for another generation. We need to define the Israel that we want, even if the Palestinians aren't partners to an arrangement. We want a Jewish, democratic, secure and just country. Let's assume that we could define the borders in a way that would create, on the one hand, a Jewish majority and, on the other, everyone who isn't a Jew would have equal rights. A country that emphasizes security and justice. The two significant efforts to reach an agreement with the Palestinians ended badly from a security standpoint. Oslo led to the second Intifada with more than 1,000 [Israelis] killed. The withdrawal from Gaza led to rockets and tunnels. That's why we need to make sure that the process for establishing borders doesn't worsen the positive security conditions that the citizens of Israel enjoy at present. "The last component is to return to being the just and moral party in the conflict. In order to regain the internal and international recognition we need to reduce to a minimum the [Israeli] control over the Palestinians. It's important to achieve all the components, preferably in an agreement and, if not, then by independent means that are coordinated with the United States, the international community and the Sunni Arab world. In that case the Palestinian veto over our future will cease dictating the march of history. We will mold our future ourselves. The Institute for National Security Studies is going to publish a plan on that issue this summer."**