

Transcript of TIP Conference Call with Yaakov Amidror July 17 2017

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Dor Kaidar - TIP: [00:00:00] Hello and welcome to Israel Project's conference call. With eight days into the cease fire agreement in South Syria brokered between the U.S. and Russia, Israeli officials are expressing their concern from the possible ramifications of the agreement - namely the Iranian gains within the war-torn Syria. Last night Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu shared his concerns with U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson during a phone conversation and with us on the line today is Major General retired now, Yaacov Amidror, who served as the national security adviser to Prime Minister Netanyahu and currently is a senior fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies and JINSA Strategic Center for Research. Mr. Amidror, thank you for joining us.

Yaakov Amidror: [00:00:44] Thank you for having me.

Dor Kaidar - TIP: [00:00:46] Can you share with us broadly what are the Israeli concerns, first of all.

Yaakov Amidror: [00:00:50] I think that there are two different kinds of concerns. One is about the big strategy that the Iranians are implementing now, having a direct corridor on land from Baghdad to Damascus and that will bring the Iranians for the first time in modern history to have a direct land corridor from Tehran through Baghdad into Damascus and into the Mediterranean. And that would allow the Iranians to be much more involved around Israel with the Lebanese in Syria. That will put of course the situation of the state of Israel in a different battle ground because we will have the Iranians on our borders with direct connection to Iran - a long line but still very easy to move forces, capabilities and everything that the Iranians will want to build around Israel. And at the same time, it's a huge change for the Sunni countries because that will put what King Abdullah of Jordan called the Shiite crescent in the middle of the Middle East and would change the whole geostrategic situation in this area. So, this is a one issue. The second one is about the location and the implications of the Iranians building bases in Syria and Hezbollah is part of it. So, Israel might face two battlegrounds: one in Lebanon and one in Syria in which the Iranians and Hezbollah will have their infrastructure (that) can be used against Israel, part in parallel, and of course it definitely will be connected to the corridor that I just described that it makes the situation even much (more) complicated for Israel. But even without the corridor it is still giving launching pad bases in Syria to Hezbollah and the Iranians. And Israel should prevent it whatever it will be the price.

Dor Kaidar - TIP: [00:03:18] And how can Israel prevent it. What can Israel do.

Yaakov Amidror: [00:03:21] If that will not be taken into account by the those who are making those arrangements, the Americans the Russians and others, that might lead the IDF to intervene and to destroy every attempt to build infrastructure in Syria. We will not let the Iranians and Hezbollah to be the forces which will win from the long and very brutal war in Syria and to move the focus into Israel.

Dor Kaidar - TIP: [00:04:02] But do you believe Israel will have the freedom to operate in Syria during this?

Yaakov Amidror: [00:04:06] I don't see who will stop it. I mean if that is in the interest of Israel we should strive to be sure that our interests will be kept.

Dor Kaidar - TIP: [00:04:18] All right. A lot of journalists on the line are talking about Israel U.S. relations. They're saying Netanyahu seems to have largely avoided public criticism of the U.S. and

or Russian policy in Syria and the open opposition we've heard yesterday to the cease fire deal seems rare. What do you make of it?

Yaakov Amidror: [00:04:36] I think that we're understanding of the threats to Israel which emerge from this arrangement which had been done without taking into consideration the need of Israel to defend itself. And then at the end of that late hour it's not the responsibility of America or the responsibility of the Russians it's Israel's responsibility to guarantee its ability to defend itself and we will have to take all the measures which are needed for that.

Dor Kaidar - TIP: [00:05:08] But would you say that Israel's influence with Trump and or Putin on Syria is waning?

Yaakov Amidror: [00:05:16] I think that what they saw is something big, which is very important for them - for the Russians to keep the continuation of the regime in Damascus which from their point of view is a strategic goal. The Americans (goal) is to destroy ISIS, and that was their strategic goal. And Israel should take care for its strategic goal and this is to prevent the Iranians and Hezbollah from building launching pads in Syria.

Dor Kaidar - TIP: [00:05:48] Can you touch on Israel's alleged involvement in the planning of the ceasefire, one journalist is asking?

Yaakov Amidror: [00:05:55] Israel tried to make everyone understand its interest and at the end of the day the threat will be taken into account and we will not see Iranians and Hezbollah warriors near the border of Israel and we will not identify infrastructure that the Iranians and Hezbollah build towards Israel. We will be more than happy about the success of the ceasefire. We don't like the situation in which so many people have been killed and so many people became without a place to live - either refugees inside Syria or refugees outside Syria. Morally when this happens we cannot tolerate, but the price cannot be the price of having Hezbollah and Iran on our borders.

Dor Kaidar - TIP: [00:06:56] A couple of questions about the Iranian presence within Syria. Are there Iranian troops or Shiite militias already positioned within the ceasefire area? And can you talk about the lease of the airbase in Syria for Iran?

Yaakov Amidror: [00:07:11] I don't know about the situation of militias in the ceasefire area. I know that where in the past there were Iranian forces and our interest is very clear that they will not be there. About having an air base in Syria - I think that it will be very bad for Israel if the Iranians will have this capability to take off and land freely in a base which would be an Iranian base. But it depends where it will be, what kind of planes, how it will be used, for what it would be used. I mean we should not rush into conclusions only by having this ability of the Iranians.

Dor Kaidar - TIP: [00:08:06] But when Israel says it will not allow Iranian entrenchment in Syria what options that Israel really has now?

Yaakov Amidror: [00:08:14] We have a huge capability, military capability and we will do everything with it diplomatically. And both options should be used.

Dor Kaidar - TIP: [00:08:28] OK that was vague, but I assume I know why you stayed vague on this. One question on Hezbollah with your permission. From your experience, how would you analyze the buildup of Hezbollah missiles and arms factories inside Lebanon with the Iranian help?

Yaakov Amidror: [00:08:43] I think again the world is quiet about it. Lebanon is not the state anymore with any constitution in which Hezbollah is running something which is Hezbollah-land.

Lebanon as a state does not exist. But the price will be paid by the end of the day by the Lebanese. The fact is that the Iranians are building this factory inside Lebanon and one day will come and we will have to destroy it. And the price will be paid by the Lebanese who are living around (it). The fact that the Iranians and Hezbollah are spreading more than a hundred thousand rockets and missiles in Lebanon. The day will come and we will have to destroy them and the price will be paid by the Lebanese. So, the world is allowing Hezbollah and Iran to build huge military capabilities in Lebanon and the day will come and we will have to deal with it and to destroy it and the price will be paid by the Lebanese. Whoever will be complaining then about the results - the devastating situation of the Lebanese who will have to pay the price - I don't know what percentage of Lebanon will be destroyed in this struggle, but the world will have to reply to itself. The world is not stopping that and the price will be paid by the Lebanese. And then we can only be sorry about it, but we will have to our job to defend the citizens of Israel.

Dor Kaidar - TIP: [00:10:22] A very direct question from a journalist and one more before we wrap up this call - with all these developments is Israel heading for war with Hezbollah?

Yaakov Amidror: [00:10:33] It very much depends what will be the situation in the future. If the Iranians and Hezbollah will not turn into Israel, but will do what they think should be done without touching Israel, Israel will not intervene. But if they will begin to build infrastructure which might be used against Israel in Syria and will connect this land corridor into Iraq and begin to move materials from this area into Syria, that will make the war inevitable.

Dor Kaidar - TIP: [00:11:18] OK. And one final question with your permission. A broader question as we mark these days two years since the Iran agreement. What is your assessment on the nuclear deal and what we've seen in the past two years and looking forward.

Yaakov Amidror: [00:11:32] It's a very good question to conclude because the ability of the Iranians to do what they are doing now in Syria and in Iraq and to be such in such involvement in both Iraq and Syria and their relation with Hezbollah and the connection with Syria everything is built on the legitimacy that they gained in this agreement. The agreement is the source of all these problems. It is even more dangerous than we imagined when it was signed. It is the interest of the Iranians to keep the agreement because that will allow them to change the Middle-East and to be ready after the period of the agreement to go nuclear with their strategic situation is much much better and they are in a better position to deal with any kind of new wave of sanctions. The result of this agreement will be devastating for the Middle East, not just for Israel.

Dor Kaidar - TIP: [00:12:37] All right. Yaakov Amidror thank you very much for sharing your thoughts with us. Always a pleasure hosting you on our calls. And have a good day.