

Conference Call with Ambassador Ron Dermer

Omri Ceren: Thank you for that, and thank you in advance to Ambassador Dermer for joining us, and thank you all of you for joining us on what I know is, to put it lightly, a busy news day. I won't take up more time than absolutely necessary; I just wanted to make sure that you knew that we're taking questions either by email – press@theisraelproject.org – or you'll have an opportunity to queue up after the Ambassador is done with his opening remarks. On that point I'll turn the conference call over to Ambassador Ron Dermer, Israel's envoy to Washington.

Amb. Ron Dermer: Thank you very much, and thanks for the opportunity to speak to everybody. I'll try to make my remarks brief so that you can ask some more questions. We've had over 500 rockets fired at Israel in the last few days and we've had about six million Israelis who have heard the red alert system, the air raid siren, go off and have had to seek shelter. So, you could understand what would happen if you had maybe two-thirds or three-quarters of the American population, well over 200 million Americans would be rushing to get to bomb shelters. That's the situation that we have in Israel. The goal of our operation, which the Prime Minister laid out pretty clearly and he continues - actually as we speak he is just finishing up a press conference that he gave in Israel where he made a statement - is essentially to restore quiet to Israel. Every nation has a right to this quiet and he'll take the action he has to take in order to achieve that objective. I know that a lot have been thinking and their writing has been focused on the question of land forces versus air power. These are all tactical questions; the main issue is the Prime Minister will do what he has to do in order to achieve that objective of restoring quiet for the people of Israel. He has mobilized - has had authorization I should say - to mobilize 40,000 reserves. He's called up 20,000 of them and he will make sure that he has all the options available to him to do what he has to do in order to achieve his objective. Now one of the reasons why fortunately we have not had, the main reason I guess at this point, why we have not had more casualties in Israel is the Iron Dome system, which is a very effective system of an anti-missile defense. I'm sure most people on the line are aware of it, but maybe there is a few that are not. The Iron Dome system does not engage each incoming rocket, what it does is - we have about eight units throughout the country that are currently deployed - and what it does is it will, if a missile is being fired at an area that an Iron Dome system protects, if it's gonna end up in an open area, which is not a built up area, then it sort of lets it go. Whereas if it is heading into one of these areas, into a built-up area where the chances of having civilian casualties are very high, then it engages it. And we have, we have fired, I don't know what the precise number of interceptions have been, but it's in many many dozens thus far in order to take out a lot of these incoming rockets. For the actual percentage that hves been knocked out, I can only say that it looks like it is a higher percentage than it had happened last time around which was November 2012, the last time we had a confrontation with Hamas on this scale, we had

an eight-day confrontation, you will recall, in November 2012. And I think when all was said and done, Iron Dome had knocked out about 84% of the incoming rockets. It's not perfect, but it's pretty good and from what I understand it is a higher percentage today. We never get final results until after the operations are ended, and then they do an investigation and look rocket by rocket, but it is a very, very high percentage that we have been able to intercept. There are things that obviously get through. You saw some attacks today in Israel, those of you who are following the press there, of a gasoline station in the southern part of Israel, apparently a synagogue was hit in the Tel Aviv area, I understand from press reports as well. So, we're not perfect, but it's a very, very high percentage. And the reason why Iron Dome is so important is that it not only protects our civilians, I think one thing people do not understand, it also actually protects Palestinian civilians on the other side. And the reason why that's the case is that it gives Israel and Israel's decision-makers the time and space they need to prosecute this operation against Hamas terrorists, in a calibrated way with far fewer casualties than would otherwise be the case. [Because] you might imagine that if all these rockets are landing and you have many, many casualties on the Israeli side, the need to operate very, very quickly and maybe with a greater use of force in a less measured way would be, would be higher. And so the Iron Dome has allowed the Israeli Prime Minister both now and in the previous confrontation of Pillar of Defense, it did not exist in Cast Lead (which was the confrontation with Hamas, which was the first one on this scale at the end of 2008, beginning of 2009), then Iron Dome was not deployed. In Pillar of Defense you had fewer batteries, now you have more batteries, more interceptors, and Israel is prepared to knock out these rockets that Hamas is firing. But it gives the decision-makers in Jerusalem the time and space they need. Of course, there's also the diplomatic component here. I can say as Israel's Ambassador to Washington, I'm very appreciative and thankful of the support of the President of the United States for Israel's right to defend itself. He spoke to the Prime Minister yesterday, it was a very good conversation that they had. We're in touch with the White House basically every day. They understand what's going on fully and I think they appreciate that Israel is taking the action it needs to take in order to protect its population. Everyone can imagine to themselves what America would do if 200 million Americans were in bomb shelters from incoming rockets. One other point I want to mention before I open it up for your questions, and that is: To really understand the difference between Israel and Hamas, because sometimes people cover this conflict and they look, well how many civilians are being killed on each side? And I don't think that that's appropriate, to simply do a sort of body bag count on both sides, and say this actually is a barometer of the justice of operations. In World War II, 20 times as many Germans died as Americans, it didn't mean that the Nazis were right. Israel is facing an enemy in Hamas that is deliberately targeting Israel's civilians by indiscriminately firing these rockets at everybody, and what they hope to achieve is to kill as many people as possible. And I can assure you that Hamas will think it's a great success to hit a greater number of Israeli civilians. The more, the better from their point of view. And on the

Israeli side, it's the exact opposite. We go to great lengths to keep civilians out of harm's way, and every time a civilian is killed unintentionally, not deliberately of course, and every time a civilian is killed, that's an operational failure. And the more civilians who are killed, the greater the failure. The problem we face is we have in Hamas an enemy that not only fires at our civilians and doesn't care about them, they don't care about their own civilians, and that's why they place their missile batteries next to schools, next to hospitals, mosques, private homes. And just yesterday, as many people may know that the Interior Ministry of Hamas called on the residents of Gaza to ignore the warnings of the IDF. And we warn as much as we can, in order to keep Palestinian civilians out of harm's way. We drop fliers, we make phone calls, we send text messages, there have also been many cases when a certain area is being targeted that a sort of a dummy bomb will be dropped first in order to get people to leave that area and then it will be followed up with the bombing of the actual site. And one of the tragedies we had a couple of days ago with a family, I think it was in Khan Yunis, was because the family apparently returned after the dummy bomb was dropped and our guys did not see that and that's how this family was unfortunately killed in that action. So, while we're taking all these actions to keep their civilians out of harm's way, we have a Hamas Interior Ministry that is telling people to rush into harm's way and so it may be actually the greatest testament to what Israel does in order to keep Palestinian civilians out of harm's way that you have a Hamas Interior Ministry that is so convinced that if their civilians rush to the rooftops, that Israel won't take action. And by-and-large that's been the case. We don't deliberately target the innocent and they know that. And that's why I think they're issuing these calls. They don't particularly care whether we kill civilians on their side; they see that as a way to win an international propaganda victory. So I think the most important thing that people who want to contribute to peace in the region can do right now is first to back Israel's right of self-defense, and second to send a very clear message that this, these types of tactics of warfare, of using people as human shields, are completely unacceptable. And I think if that message gets to the Palestinians, then maybe we won't have to go through round after round after round of these confrontations in the future because they believe that these tactics are legitimate, and I think any attempt to argue that Israel is not being legitimate in exercising its right of self-defense flies in the face of everything we know about the history of warfare. No country would tolerate these types of attacks and I am not aware of a single example in the history of the world of a military which is acting with such restraint with direct attacks that are coming against its homeland and its civilian population. I'll leave it at that and take any questions you might have.

Omri Ceren: Operator, could we give instructions on how to queue up. [Operator gives instructions.]

Question: Ambassador Dermer, thank you very much for doing this. You'll be aware that the UN this morning have questioned whether Israel is actually violating

international law in terms of the numbers of civilians who are being killed. It does seem that there are more civilians being killed this time than under the operation in 2012. And I wondered why that was. It looks a quarter of all those who've been killed are children. Yet in 2012, as you say, the Israeli military was really very smart in terms of making sure that the targets were correctly identified. It would seem that it's not quite as precise this time as it was last time and I wondered what the reason for that was.

Ambassador Dermer: I don't know that that's the case. I also don't know exactly what the numbers of children or civilians and who they're categorizing in all those categories. I can only tell you that Israel upholds the highest standards of international law. I mean, I knew that; before I was the senior advisor to the Prime Minister. In my previous post I was the senior advisor during Pillar of Defense and I knew that Israel had, you know, sent fliers and text messages and all this, but I had no idea to the extent that Israel goes to comport with, with international law. It was actually almost mind-boggling to see the interconnection between the legal officials in, in the, among our military authorities and the pilots themselves, in those cases from use of air power, how much they were involved in the decision-making that Israel takes. So I don't think there's been any relaxing of any way of the standards that we use in the confrontation. It could be that there were a couple of actions, I mentioned one of them where the family rushed back. Obviously, any incident where civilians are killed there is an investigation afterwards and I'm sure, hopefully when the dust is settled and things clear, we'll be able to look case-by-case. But I think we have been extraordinarily careful in the use of, in how we're actually employing our force. It might be that Hamas has actually increased the use of human shields on their part. It might be because they're learning the lessons from Pillar of Defense and how careful we are to avoid civilian casualties that they've decided to embed themselves even more in civilian areas but whenever our intelligence knows that civilians are going to be killed by an operation, that we take such, uh, great care to avoid any of these casualties. And I've seen time after time how operations are cancelled even at the last second. I remember during Pillar of Defense we had an operation where our intelligence had had the targets of many of Hamas's long-range rockets and one of those rockets at the time, right before, we destroyed most of them within the first couple of hours of that operation. And I remember with one of them our intelligence knew exactly where the rocket was but right before they were going to hit it, I think it was a kid on a bike if I remember correctly, had come in to the screen and that operation was cancelled and I believe that actual rocket was fired at Israel. I think there may actually be cases pending in Israel that are suing our Defense Ministry for valuing, the claim that's being made, is we're valuing Palestinian civilians more than our own civilians because we're taking such great care to avoid civilian casualties on their side that that means that there are going to be more rockets fired at the Israel side. So I'm not aware of any change. I would wait until the end of the operation. Hopefully it will limit the number of casualties we'll have on

all sides and then we'll take a hard look at it but there's no relaxing of the operational constraints that the IDF has whatsoever, none that I'm aware of.

Question: Hi Ambassador, I wonder if you could just talk about the role of Iran here. Do you see yourself also in a kind of indirect conflict with Iran, who appears to have supplied many of these missiles? And can you also just remind us of the evidence for the common assertion that these missiles are coming from Iran.

Ambassador Dermer: Well, there's a lot of different missiles and a lot of different terror organizations. So you gotta keep all the facts straight of who's backing who, and how much they're backing them. In the case of Iran: Iran obviously is a supporter of Hamas. They, another terror organization in Gaza that is responsible for some of the rocket attacks, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, that's a wholly owned subsidiary of Iran. With Hamas, you're talking about financial support over many years and you're talking about arming them with these long-range rockets. They had in the past transported Fajr rockets to Iran, they also have these M-302 rockets. You may recall a few months ago Israel interdicted a vessel in the Red Sea, and on that vessel were forty of those M-302 rockets that originally were manufactured in Syria. They were then taken to Iran, they tried to change the bill of lading on the ship through Iraq, and eventually to take them to Sudan up through Gaza to be fired at Israel. That's a smuggling operation that we caught. It might, obviously we didn't catch everything and an M-302 is not made, as far as I'm aware, in Gaza. So that was obviously smuggled in by Iran. A lot of the smuggling operations have been made more difficult for Hamas over the last year or so because the government of Egypt has also cracked down on a lot of the tunnels that are going into Gaza. I think about 90 percent of the tunnels were destroyed, which also put a tremendous cash squeeze on Hamas because they were running a lot of their economy with the revenues I should say, that they got, the receipts, as a government were through this literally underground economy through the tunnels. So, the Egyptians had taken out about 90 percent of those, of those tunnels, and taken various different actions. And of course Israel takes many different actions in order to prevent the smuggling. I think one of the changes that maybe people are not aware of, is that a lot of the long-range rockets now – and long-range, we're talking about over the 40 kilometer range that you'd have, longer-range rockets, those that can hit Tel Aviv, that can hit Jerusalem, and that can hit beyond--the M-302 I think has a range of about 100 miles, but I'm not a military expert. You'd have to, would have to ask one of them. But the difference between the long-range rockets being smuggled or domestically manufactured. So Iran continues to do everything it can to sort of push rockets into Gaza, but we have fortunately stopped some of it. The Egyptian government has hit the tunnels hard, as I said. The difference now, in this operation to the last time is the percentage of rockets that they have through manufacturing them domestically. They have this production, manufacturing facilities in Gaza, and of course, like their missile batteries they put these facilities in heavily populated areas and next to targets that no

one would want to see hit, knowing that Israel will be very, very wary of taking any action that could harm innocents. So a lot of the rockets are coming now from being domestically manufactured. That was not the case 18 months ago. Eighteen months ago the longer-range rockets were virtually all from outside. Now, most of them are actually coming from their manufacturing facilities in Gaza, and this is a, this is one of the targets of the IDF, to try to go after not only the missile batteries that are actually firing the rockets but also the manufacturing capabilities that they have developed over time. See, Iran, for your larger question, Iran has many proxies that they use for attacks against Israel, they have Islamic Jihad directly, as I said, in Gaza. They have Hezbollah in the north; we've had a rocket earlier fired from Lebanon. I'm not sure if they've determined yet exactly who fired it, but Hezbollah is a proxy of Iran. They have 100,000 rockets there. They're busy helping the Iranians kill a lot of people in Syria and helping the Bashar Assad regime. That you have in the larger region a battle between radical Shias led by Iran and its main proxy Hezbollah, and radical Sunnis where you have ISIS and Hamas and you have Al Qaeda and you have other groups and there's a great battle on who's going to be the king of the militant Islamic hill, but there's no place anywhere around that hill, neither for Christians or certainly not for a Jewish state.

Omri Ceren: We're, I know, running low on time, Ambassador. There's a bunch of questions that came in, all that have in various ways to do with the conversations that the Prime Minister has had with the President and of course that various members of the Foreign Ministry have had with their counterparts in the U.S. They clump roughly into two questions – one is to what degree the U.S. is or is not pressing Jerusalem for a ceasefire. So, for instance, there was a readout of the conversation between the Prime Minister and President in which the President offered to mediate one and then there have been additional backchannel talks. And so that's one class of questions. And then the other is whether or not the U.S. has in fact been playing an active role in seeking to dampen the tension?

Ambassador Dermer: Well, look. Israel has sought an active role in sort of dampening the tensions. The Prime Minister, you will recall, a week ago, made clear that quiet would be met by quiet. If Hamas would cease its attacks that there would be no reason for Israel to take operations. That was not a hugely popular position for him to take at the time in Israel, considering that the country was being rocketed and they demanded very tough action from the Prime Minister to protect them. But he did that because he did everything he could to try to deescalate the situation. Unfortunately, it just led to more rocket fire because sometimes in our neck of the woods, restraint is seen as a sign of weakness and Hamas decided to increase the number of rockets it was firing at Israel in the range of those rockets and they fired I believe about 100 rockets the day before Israel decided to launch this latest operation. So we, from the beginning, did everything that we could to deescalate. Now, we're in a different reality

because we've got three-quarters of our population who have been in bomb shelters and obviously Israel is going to have to achieve, will achieve its military objectives. And when we finish, and when we achieve those objectives, then obviously there will be no reason to continue the operations, but we have to achieve those objectives. As for the overall approach of the United States, I'd say they've been very supportive just as they were a year and a half ago. Then it was an eight-day conflict, I think we're in day 4 of this one, and in those eight days, if I remember correctly, the President and the Prime Minister spoke four times and both in the public statements that were made and the private conversations that were held between them, there was very strong support from the President of Israel's exercising its right to defend itself. There is nothing that has been said, or I've heard, that would suggest that that's not the case now. I think there's a deep understanding here, both in the administration and in Congress. Yesterday, I briefed a forum of senators in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a couple of other committees that they combined. Today, I was in the House, briefing representatives in the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House, and you see very strong bipartisan support for Israel sort of across the board. And I think everybody there is thinking 'what's America going to do if we were faced with this situation?' So I suspect that that support will continue. I know a lot people are focused on, "Is Israel going to do a ground operation, or not do a ground operation?" That's a tactical question that Israel has to decide, that the Prime Minister will have to decide, and the political leadership will have to decide whether this or that military action is necessary to achieve the objective. The Prime Minister also said, I don't know if the journalists who are on this line got to hear, but I would read what the Prime Minister said, of course. Just now about two minutes before I got on this call, the Prime Minister was finishing up his press conference and he was very clear that international pressure is not going to get Israel to fail to achieve the objective that we have set out. He made a very strong statement on that point. But I don't think that's in any way connected to his conversation that he had with the President because there is I think very strong support there, at least, for Israel's right to defend itself and also we saw strong support from the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, from President Hollande of France, from Prime Minister Cameron--all people who the Prime Minister spoke to in the last few days, Prime Minister Harper of Canada. So right now I think Israel has strong diplomatic backing for what it's trying to do and I can tell you, when I mentioned something about Iron Dome, that Iron Dome gives Israel the time and space that it needs in order to achieve its objectives in a calibrated, in a calibrated way, and to not rush to have to make decisions in a way that could lead to more civilian casualties. In the same way, actually, strong diplomatic support for Israel actually enabled the de-escalation of the situation in 2012 because I think once Hamas understood that Israel had that wall-to-wall backing, I think that they were much more eager to move towards a ceasefire than would otherwise be the case. So, not only do I see strong diplomatic support today for Israel's action. I believe that the stronger that support for Israel's right to defend itself,

the easier it will be actually, to de-escalate the situation, so we hope, we hope that that support will continue.

Omri Ceren: On that note, we're out of time. I know that we only had you until noon. Thank you, again, for taking the time on what I'm sure is a busy day and thank you all for joining us as well. As always, if you need anything else, please go ahead and ping us at press@theisraelproject.org. Thank you everybody.

Ambassador Dermer: Thank you.