

Conference Call with Ambassador Michael Oren

Omri Ceren: Thank you for that introduction. Thank you in advance to Michael Oren for joining us today. Thank you all of you for hopping on a call at what I know is a very very busy time for everybody. We have been trying to convey to folks a range of dynamics that are occurring in the Middle East. Of course, there was the unrest in the West Bank, but in recent days there has been an escalation in the Gaza Strip that I'm sure all of you have been following closely. And we wanted to begin to contextualize that, not just the military substance, not just what the events are on the ground, but the potential consequences, both domestically in Israel and domestically in the United States and in the context of international relations and the broader diplomatic environment. On that note, we wanted to connect everybody with former Israeli Ambassador to Washington Michael Oren. He's currently the Abba Eban Chair in International Diplomacy at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya. He's also currently an Ambassador in Residence at the Atlantic Council. And before I turn it over to him, I just want to set up some ground rules, we have a ton of people on this call and we'll be taking questions by email. You can email your questions either to press@theisraelproject.org or melissaw@theisraelproject.org and we will queue them up at the end after Ambassador Oren is done with his questions. On that note, sir, I'll hand it over to you.

Michael Oren: Thank you very much Omri. Greetings, everybody from Tel Aviv. At this hour it's still quiet, Tel Aviv, but we may have some interruptions in the course of our discussion today. This marks the second day of Israel's Protective Edge Operation, which has now involved Israeli strikes at roughly 550 Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip. About 130 of those sites were struck today. In return, Israel has been hit by about 300 rockets over the last two days, about half of those just over the course of the last 24 hours. Today, rockets reached as far north as Zichron Yaakov, which is coming very close to Haifa already. This is the longest range that Hamas has been able to achieve in the recent rounds of fighting with Israel. Of those rockets, about 40 have been intercepted by Iron Dome over the two days, 20 in the last 24 hours. Some of these interceptions are quite dramatic and just note that Iron Dome is only fired at rockets that are going to hit populated areas. Rockets that are not going to hit populated areas whether they fall in open fields or [inaudible] into the sea are not intercepted, and Iron Dome has had over a 90 percent success rate over the last 48 hours. There are different reports about Palestinian casualties. Israel's Ynet reports of 27 dead; CNN, 43 dead; *Jerusalem Post*, about 100 injured and 35 dead. So, the reports vary.

But Israel is making an extraordinary effort to avoid civilian casualties. Many of the methods are known to you: dropping leaflets, making text messages, making phone calls, the so-called "knock on the roof" where the Israeli Air Force fires missiles without any explosive charges onto roofs and lets people know that the building is going to be

struck. It's not a foolproof system, but it has proven successful in reducing civilian casualties and that is certainly the objective of the IDF moving forward.

There is a political environment in Israel, a continuing debate over whether Israel should escalate the conflict in response to escalation from Hamas. Israeli leaders, particularly the Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, in the week before the operation was broadcasting very loudly to Hamas his reluctance to escalate; whether this actually goaded Hamas into escalating in return as yet remains unclear. But no end is in sight, no end is in sight, and Israel has called up more than 40,000 reserves. They are gathering along the Gaza border for the possibility of some type of ground operation. That would be in Hamas's interest. Hamas is an organization that has, whose influence in the region has declined markedly over the course of last year. It lost its primary backers in Syria, in Iran, and then finally in Egypt with the fall of the Morsi government. The Muslim Brotherhood was sort of the mother organization of Hamas. The economy in Gaza was abysmal and Hamas believes that if it can drag Israel into a ground operation that that ground operation will not succeed in uprooting Hamas from the Gaza Strip and that Hamas will emerge from that with greater legitimacy throughout the entire Arab world and that Israel will be condemned for various war crimes. Indeed, even Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, has accused Israel of war crimes and has said that he will apply for membership for the Palestinian Authority for the International Criminal Court and try Israel for war crimes. This is at the early stage of this conflict.

So tonight, the northern part of the country has been braced for another round of rockets. We saw several last night, we saw several the night before, and they've certainly proved that they can reach this area. And there is a stark distinction between the way life is being conducted in the center part of the country and the southern part of the country. The southern party of the country has been under almost continuous shelling. As I said earlier, about 150 rockets have hit Israel since the beginning of this operation. But most have fallen in the south, and only small numbers in the center of the country. Speaking here from Tel Aviv, life is going on pretty normally. The shops and the restaurants are full and people are out working. But that's not the case in the south, and the south is an [inaudible] part of the country and Israel's not going to put a different price on the lives of its citizens. So, it continues. I'm not a prophet, I cannot tell you whether it's going, any end is in sight. Right now, no major mediation on the part of the Egyptians or others, other than the United States and other countries in the world calling on all sides to exercise restraint. The United States has also said that Israel has the right to defend itself, that no country should have to sustain a long block of attack on its civilians tonight.

So let me stop there and I'll open up to any questions, please.

Omri Ceren: Thank you for that, Ambassador. And I'll remind people that you can email your questions in real-time to press@theisraelproject.org. The first...we have two broad categories, one are Hamas intentions and the other are Israeli intentions, but let's begin with Hamas intentions. You mentioned that Hamas's influence has been in precipitous decline, that, you know, the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood hurt them, that regional dynamics more broadly have eroded their influence. What motives would they have to escalate as they've done over the recent months? So there's been a lot of people talking, saying that this is going to be disastrous for them. What could they be thinking, in blunt terms?

Michael Oren: In blunt terms, they're willing to pay a very high price to restore their legitimacy in the Arab world. Remember, they were allied with Syria, with Iran. In the aftermath of the Syrian civil war, neither Iran nor the regime of Bashar al-Assad was very popular. They lost their primary backers in Egypt, the economy has taken a nose dive in Gaza. So they see this for them as something close to a win-win situation. Even if the conflict goes on at the current rate, with Israel conducting air strikes, say 100 a day into Gaza, and Hamas firing 70-100 rockets into Israel every day, that's a victory for Hamas. They look like they're standing up to the great Israeli juggernaut, alone in the Arab world. So they gain just by, by keeping the status quo. But if they can drag Israel into a ground war, and they can exact a price in terms of Israeli lives for that action, they can mobilize the international community with charges of war crimes. They will show that Israel is killing civilians. We all remember what happened in 2009 with the Goldstone Report, and there are already charges of disproportionality on the part of Israeli actors, then Israel will be forced to stop by a Security Council resolution, and Hamas will survive, and it will look very legitimate indeed.

Omri Ceren: So there are a couple of questions that have come in that I guess would function as follow-ups to what you mentioned about the international community. We've gotten a couple of questions about whether or not the international community writ large, but also Washington to some degree, is in a tough spot issuing condemnations to Israel after having endorsed a Palestinian unity government that was agreed to by Hamas, and that some has said emboldened the group.

Michael Oren: I think you can probably make a case – and I don't have any, there's no hard evidence I can adduce to substantiate the case, but it can be made nonetheless - that the entire concatenation of events that led to the outbreak of fighting here began with the Palestinian unity government. That the unity government between Fatah and Hamas - there may have been a wing of Hamas that didn't agree with that move, and sought to frustrate it by conducting a terrorist attack in the West Bank against Israelis, that could have been the motivation, we don't know yet, behind the killing of three Israeli teenagers, which set into motion the first Israeli strikes against Hamas. Hamas replied, and the steady escalation ever since.

So, since then it's important to point out, and here you can adduce evidence, there has been no indication whatsoever that either the United States or other members of the Quartet are willing to renew or reassess their very quick recognition of that unity government. Mahmoud Abbas, rather interestingly, is taking no responsibility for the rocket fire but he is claiming that he is a victim of Israel's reprisals against the rocket fire, and claiming war crimes. And no one is taking Mahmoud Abbas to task for this at all. Yesterday at a conference held by *Ha'aretz* newspaper on the peace process, Phil Gordon, Philip Gordon of the National Security Council, in charge of Middle East and Arab-Israeli affairs, described Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) as the ideal partner, a person who is surely interested in peace. That doesn't resonate with a large segment of the Israeli population that is listening to Mahmoud Abbas and hearing him not condemning the rocket fire but accusing Israel of war crimes.

Omri Ceren: So you know that Gordon speech has been controversial and has been written about a lot in Israel and I imagine will be written about later as the controversy progresses on the U.S. side of things. Is the speech indicative of the administration's position? Because statements that came out of the administration yesterday both from the State Department and the White House seemed to not just condemn Hamas' attacks on Israel, but also to blame Hamas for civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip. What should people be understanding from that speech that Mr. Gordon gave?

Michael Oren: Again, there was a significant onus placed on Israel for the failure of peace talks. The administration's position has been consistent since its inception in 2009 that there's no alternative to peace, that peace is the only way Israel can preserve its identity as a Jewish and democratic state, that interim agreements will not work, that annexation formulas will only further enrage the world and are illegal - they were termed illegal via the annexation formulas, with a particular reference to a proposal by Minister Bennett, Naftali Bennett. But the thrust of the argument again, was that Mahmoud Abbas is a viable and sincere partner, and right now the administration sees no contradiction between condemning the Hamas rocket fire and maintaining its recognition of the Hamas-Fatah unity government.

Omri Ceren: There are a couple specific questions, not to take us too far off the diplomatic track, but it seems people have keyed into a couple of things you said earlier. The first is you referred to Israel's practice of "knocking on the roof," of informing civilians who are in the area when there might be an attack, and somebody asked you to expand upon that. And also to discuss that tactic, which is to say that goal of minimizing civilian casualties in the context of new technologies that are deployed by the Israelis: smartbombs, cement-filled bombs, drones, robots, etc. – I guess the measures that Israel is taking to minimize civilian casualties.

Michael Oren: Without going into classified operational details, Israel has achieved a very high level of accuracy, not only in the munition deliveries and the types of

munition, and the types of ordnance, but also in its warning devices. The families are known, who are living in every house, the names are known, and when a warning is sent to a family to evacuate a house that is going to be hit, because the house belongs to a Hamas commander, then there is somebody who is actually contacting every member there and counting them as they leave the house, making sure that everyone's out of the house. That doesn't mean that mistakes don't happen, in one case the family apparently went back in their house, still being investigated, after they were warned to get out. Israel has encountered now cases where Hamas has put civilians on the roof to act as human shields against the bombing of these buildings.

Omri Ceren: A second specific question that references something you said. The decision by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to again, or to again return to escalate the Palestinian move to gain international recognition, specifically there is news coming out this morning that they'll seek membership in the International Criminal Court, and we've got questions of two flavors. One is, what does this do to prospects to return to peacemaking, does it erode Israeli confidence in previous assurances? And then the second question is what might the result be both for Israel, but also potentially for the Palestinians; it's not as if, the Palestinians, making them...that's it's not without risk to the Palestinians to make them...to join the ICC.

Michael Oren: Go back now to May of 2010. In an op-ed article in *The New York Times*, Mahmoud Abbas published his intention to transform the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians into a matter of international law. And in pursuit of that goal, he has tried now several times to declare Palestinian statehood unilaterally in the UN and to achieve full statehood. Right now, the Palestinian Authority has Vatican-like status in the UN, but to achieve full membership, as a sovereign state, and then to turn around and accuse Israel of being a state that is illegally occupying a member state of the UN, go to international courts, and then to seek sanctions levied on Israel. Now that is, from my perspective, that is a tactical threat...a strategic threat, as opposed to the tactical threat posed by Hamas missiles. We do have Iron Dome to take down Hamas missiles, we don't have a diplomatic Iron Dome to take down sanctions, so I take that threat very, very seriously.

To the best of my knowledge, Mahmoud Abbas is not going, is not trying to sanction Israel in order to get a better two-state solution. That's why I talk about a strategic threat. He has not indicated in any way that that is his goal, and I think that it will pose a great challenge to the state of Israel if he does this. I don't know of many downsides. There are people in Israel who talk about that Israel can make counter-charges in the ICC and the ICJ, saying that if Mahmoud Abbas indeed arrogates his position as the de facto sovereign over all the territory and all the population of both the West Bank and Gaza, than he is responsible for the firing of hundreds of rockets at Israeli civilians, he is responsible for what is clearly a war crime, and Israel can sue him in return. I think that in the best of all possible worlds that might be the case, but in many international

forums, certainly in the UN Commission on Human Rights, Israel doesn't get a fair shake and there is no best of all possible worlds, and I think that, again, the danger of sanctions and embargoes is a very real one.

Omri Ceren: The regional situation has been described and is fundamentally different than it was during previous conflicts between the Israelis and Hamas. The Arab Spring has both come and waned since then, and you referenced earlier that Hamas' influence has precipitously declined, and we talked about how that might be influencing their motives. But to what extent will the regional situation affect Israel's calculations? So for instance, there's discussions that the Egyptians are likely to be much more muted in their criticism as compared to in the past, but also that considerations may be different for the Jordanians and so on. I was wondering if you could speak to how Arab states may treat this in a way that's different from the past.

Michael Oren: Arab states are quite frightened by what's happened in Syria and what's happened in Iraq. It is part of the broader confluence of interests between Israel and Sunni countries of the Gulf and with Egypt. We agree on Iran, we agree on Syria, we agree on ISIS, we agree, we agree on Hamas. The Saudis don't like Hamas either and neither do the Egyptians. And in a very broad way, we agreed on peace process. There was a possibility for a two-state solution; the Saudis and the Arab peace plan are on board for the two-state solution. So there's a tremendous confluence of interest there and this may play out. I haven't seen tremendous protests around the Arab world, as there were in the past. There haven't been huge outcries in the Arab world about Israeli war crimes, allegations of war crimes. So far it's only from Mahmoud Abbas and I don't see him enjoying a tremendous amount of support. And ultimately he may get more support from places in Europe than he may get from the Middle East.

Omri Ceren: A number of very specific questions came in asking whether or not Israel will reoccupy the Gaza Strip or whether that's on the table. That seems to be, at least in the Israeli public discourse, to be a non-starter. I was wondering if you agree that it's a non-starter and if so, why that is, given that it appears that Israel has now gone into Gaza numerous times since the disengagement?

Michael Oren: How do you define occupied? If it's occupied indefinitely, I don't think there's any debate about that – very few people would be in favor of that. Whether it's to move the army in and clean out Hamas, uproot Hamas from its headquarters, disarm Hamas physically, that is a real debate going on here. It's a debate going on in the Israeli government. It was a debate that prompted the Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, whose party Yisrael Beiteinu to break away from its unity agreement with the Likud. And this caused something of a shift in political calculations in this country-- the Likud has lost a tremendous amount of influence here. This is a heavy price that Netanyahu played for urging restraint. So the debate goes on. I was surprised -- I was on the morning news today with the Strategic Affairs Minister Yuval Steinitz, who is

known to be very close to the Prime Minister, who was talking about the need to move the army into Gaza and to clean out Hamas. So there are very serious and powerful people who are conducting this debate. And I think as the rockets continue to fall, that debate will only sharpen.

Omri Ceren: There are two final questions, one is actually a subset of that question, which is -- I just want to push for a second -- you stated tersely that in Israeli public dialogue, it's a non-starter to reoccupy the Gaza Strip in the sense of, you know, Israel reversing its disengagement. I just want to press on that for a second because we did get several questions on this. Could you describe the degree to which there is a consensus in Israel that that's just simply not an option?

Michael Oren: I didn't see any hard and fast polls on it. I'm sure from the people who were uprooted from their homes in 2005 and their supporters in the Israeli public who for religious reasons view Gaza as part of the traditional Jewish homeland -- then I'd imagine that they would long to return to Gaza. But for the bulk of Israeli opinion, I have not seen any indication of the desire to reoccupy the Strip, on the contrary, what I hear most frequently, and equally, is that any attempt to move the army in there -- it will be very difficult to extricate the army afterwards, that there'll be an immensely heavy diplomatic price to pay and that it will involve losses on our side of military personnel, civilian losses, heavy civilian losses on the Palestinian side and it will be a very long, protracted struggle. People remember, people of my generation in particular, remember when Israel last occupied the Gaza Strip in June 1967, it took over three years, three brutal years, to neutralize the terror cells in Gaza; that was Arik Sharon who was in charge of that operation. And I think today with the 24-hour media coverage, I think it would, again, it would be almost impossible to replicate that type of neutralization operation without paying an enormously high diplomatic price.

Omri Ceren: And then, the last question, while we still have you, and I know our time is running short, and thank you in advance for hopping on today, the last question has to do with the lead-up to the current operation, specifically what Israeli thinking was. There are two debates, or rather, two sides of a single debate that has been going on in the public as to where the Israelis were. One side says that, and this is mainly a Western, coming out of the Western media, that the Israelis and Hamas both have an incentive to escalate. The other side has pointed to efforts by the prime minister. Given your experience with the current government, and also just being on the ground, what your perception of the lead-up was, and where the prime minister was in the lead-up.

Michael Oren: My perception was that after the kidnapping and murder of the three Israeli teenagers, the government had to respond in some way, and the evidence pointed to Hamas involvement at a very high level -- that's what the government has claimed, I have not seen that evidence, the government has claimed that and that there had to be some price to pay for murdering three innocent Israeli boys. But indeed right

after that, Prime Minister Netanyahu indicated his reluctance to escalate, he was interested in de-escalating, and as I said earlier, he paid a very high political price for that. We're in the Middle East and things work a little differently here. In other parts of the world, if you're strong, and you indicate that you don't want to fight, that is perceived as underscoring your strength. But in the Middle East, if you're strong and indicate that you don't want to fight, you're reluctant to fight, that reveals weakness. In a truly Middle Eastern, paradoxical way, by saying that it was reluctant to escalate, Israel removed Hamas' excuse not to escalate, and managed to actually goad Hamas into escalating further. Now we're in a very difficult situation where Israel doesn't really have much of an option of backing down, because Hamas will just keep firing rockets at Israel, and Israel will have to respond. And it's going to be, and it's going to be a very tough couple of days.

Again, some of us with memories that go back a few years, can recall that in 1996 during Operation Grapes of Wrath, during a limited operation against Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, an Israeli tank shell hit a UN post and killed a hundred civilians, and that changed the course of that operation. That was in Kfar Kana. And in 2006, a decade later, the same village, an Israeli shell hit a building and killed a number of civilians and that changed the entire course of the Second Lebanon War. So the Israeli Air Force, for all of its accuracy, and it really has achieved an immense and almost historic level of precision, is still up against the law of averages. Especially in an area that's densely populated like Gaza, where the building codes aren't particularly strict, you could strike one building and have another building down the street collapse. The chances of having, of inflicting, inadvertently, civilian casualties will grow, you're up against the law averages, will grow as the air operations continue and the course of this conflict can change very abruptly, as we've learned from the past. So I'm going to leave you with as many questions as I've answered this evening, and I apologize, but I do thank The Israel Project for bringing us all together, I think they do a fabulous job and let's pray for a quiet night in Tel-Aviv.

Omri Ceren: Thank you for that and I'm sure everybody's prayers are with you as well. Thank you all for joining us and as always, if you have further questions or things we can help with, hit us up at press@theisraelproject.org and have a good day everybody.