

# **THE ISRAEL PROJECT**

## **THE MOSSAD AND ISRAELI INTELLIGENCE**

**WELCOME/MODERATOR:**

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**SPEAKER:**

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ALAN ELSNER: Hello and good afternoon, everybody, from The Israel Project in Washington, D.C. My name is Alan Elsner. I'm the communications director for The Israel Project. I will be moderating today's call with our guest, Ilan Mizrahi.

Just a quick – a few quick biographical notes about our guest: During Ilan Mizrahi's long and distinguished career in Israeli intelligence, he served as head of the Israeli National Security Council from 2006 to 2008, directly reporting to the prime minister. And from 2000 to 2003, he was the deputy chief of the Mossad.

While in the Mossad – and he served in the Mossad from 1972 to 2003 – he held a variety of field and staff positions, including heading up the divisions of the counterterrorism operations, recruiting and operations, and intelligence, where he was responsible for information analysis, threat evaluation, risks and opportunities and assisting operation divisions in target selection.

In 2005, Mr. Mizrahi became head of HLS, a defense and security company, where he worked on projects outside of Israel such as VIP protection and national infrastructure security.

Mr. Mizrahi holds a bachelor's degree in Islam and Middle East history as well as political science, and a master's degree in political science.

We've had a lot of great questions, but before we get to them, I'm going to turn it over to Ilan Mizrahi to make some opening remarks.

ILAN MIZRAHI: Thank you all. Well, I think that this is an opportunity to talk about the Middle Eastern issues where some focuses are most important. Only this morning, we heard what's going on in Lebanon; we have problems in Iraq, in Southern Sudan, and so on. So this is, in my point of view, a great opportunity to talk about these issues.

MR. ELSNER: Okay. We've had a lot of great questions and let me get straight to them.

The first one – and it comes from Edith Lederer of the Associated Press; a similar question comes from James Bone of The Times of London and also Matthew Kalman of the London Daily Mail. And these are questions about the remarks by Meir Dagan, the former head of the Mossad, who said he didn't think Iran would be able to produce a nuclear weapon until 2015.

Do you agree? And what is Israel actively doing to prevent Iran from acquiring such weapons capability?

MR. MIZRAHI: Well, I think that it's – it will be better, in my point of view, not to fix a date – 2015, 2016 or 2014. I think that the issue is that there is a process. We should talk about the process. The Iranians are going full steam ahead in trying to have the bomb and to have the long-range missiles – both tracks. I think that they will do their best to do it as soon as possible.

I am not sure that they themselves know when they will be ready with these missiles and bombs, so in my point of view, 2015 might be later or might be even sooner. It depends now on the political decision of Khamenei and it depends on how we will be – we, I mean, international community will be really devoted to continue the several tracks of activity – diplomatic, economical, operational and military option – on the table, which I am not saying that we have to use it but I'm saying it should be on the table.

MR. ELSNER: Okay.

There are several questions about the Stuxnet virus – one from James Bone of The Times of London: How does the Stuxnet virus work? How successful has it been? And connected to that, how significant were the shooting of the two Iranian nuclear scientists? And does Israel retain an intelligence capability in Iran despite the recent arrests?

So a three-part question: one on Stuxnet, one on the shooting of the scientists and generally on Israel's intelligence capability in Iran.

MR. MIZRAHI: Well, I think as for Israeli intelligence capability, nobody will be surprised if I said that Israel has a good capabilities in Iran like others. It's not only – it's not only Israel play. It is a grand play for several others which have a very, very good intelligence agencies.

As for the worm and as for the assassination, well, I do not know who is behind it. Whoever did it, he should be blessed in my point of view but – and I think that the issue of the worm is the first time Ahmadinejad, as a matter of fact, declared that it has – it had a damage on their nuclear issues.

So I think – so I think that all this – this kind of activities – not only this kind of activities but the combined activities, as I said, diplomatically, economically and operationally – all these three tracks are bringing the results.

MR. ELSNER: Mendy Ganchrow of Boynton Beach wants to know how far is there unanimity in the Israeli intelligence community regarding a timetable for the Iraqi nuclear weapon?

And another question from James Hider of The Times, he wanted to know, will Tamir Pardo, the new Mossad chief, differ in his approach and emphasis to Meir Dagan?

MR. MIZRAHI: Well, Tamir is a fine head of the Mossad. How far and how deep he will – he is thinking like Meir Dagan, I really don't know. But I have no doubt that he will successfully continue operational track of Meir Dagan. No doubt at all.

As for your first question, Alan, could you repeat it please? I don't – I'm not sure that I understand it fully.

MR. ELSNER: Well, the question was how much unanimity there is in the Israeli intelligence community around Dagan's assessment of 2015 or are there different assessments? And you know, to what extent was he expressing the collective view of the Mossad?

MR. MIZRAHI: Well, I think – I do really believe that he is expressing the collective view of the Mossad and the Israeli intelligence community. I really believe so. I really believe so. He is the one to – I mean, he's the one to listen to in this issue.

MR. ELSNER: Yaakov Lappin of the Jerusalem Post would like to know how would we – how should we interpret recent Iranian announcements on the alleged Mossad spy rings captured in Tehran? How seriously should we interpret those announcements?

MR. MIZRAHI: Well, it might be true. So what? Or it might not be true. For example, when the Iranians are already several times declared about revealing Israeli or American rings of spies or individual spy but they never put on the table evidence to it. And like their offshoot in Lebanon – Hezbollah, whenever they say that they are exposing it, they put some evidence on the table.

So I don't know if it really happened and if it really happened, so, okay, so they caught one spy. So what? But I cannot rule out a situation in which it is not true and it is an issue to divert attention and to reflect to the Iranian people so we have an enemy; we have a common enemy. We have to fight it and not conflicting between ourselves.

MR. ELSNER: Michael Ledeen, who's is a well-known analyst here in Washington, D.C., – and I think he's based at the American Enterprise Institute – would like to know: Do you think Israel knows more about Iran than the United States does?

And his second question: How do you evaluate the strength of the Iranian opposition, the Green Movement?

MR. MIZRAHI: Well, I don't know how much the others know. I know I have – I "had" a very good idea of what we know. But since I'm out of office, I don't know today. So I cannot compare what we know or what the others know.

I have a huge respect to the other agencies – the Americans, the British, French, Germans – so I really just cannot – I would not dare compare it because I do not know enough. This is one thing.

As for the Green Movement, they were almost destroyed but they are still there. I think that they changed their modus operandi. Instead of going to the streets, where they will be crushed by the – by the Basij and Revolutionary Guards, they are much active now, let's say, in Internet and Twitter and so on. Of course, this will not bring down the regime or this will not make the regime change his policy but it might have – maybe it will have – in the long time, it will have its effect. But they were dramatically crushed, but they did not disappear completely.

I think that the international community calls for talking about the human rights, well, might help them – in my point of view might help a lot. And I think also that the discontinuation of sanctions depends which sanctions also might help the Iranian opposition. The Iranian opposition, at the time – when we say Iranian opposition, in this time they do not pose a threat to the regime.

MR. ELSNER: Changing tracks slightly, another question from Yaakov Lappin of the Jerusalem Post. And he wants to know about the events taking place in Lebanon.

Today, as we know, the Hezbollah ministers have resigned from the government. The government is now officially not in existence. Do you believe Lebanon is on the brink of a civil war? Perhaps you could just talk in general strategic terms about the implications of what has unfolded today in Lebanon.

MR. MIZRAHI: As far as I understand, they did not – they are threatening about leaving the government only – and that it will be executed on the afternoon. I'm not sure but I think that's what they said, which means they give some room to negotiations. And I think that, like always in Lebanon, at the end, there will be a deal between the Saudis and the Syrians.

Hariri, today, is in the United States. He will be able to meet the president, he will be able to meet King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and I think that they will come out with some kind of attitude towards what the threats of the Hezbollah.

So I think that, at the end, there will be some kind of a solution which will be bring temporarily some kind of peace in Lebanon. But it will not change fundamentally, strategically the situation in which Lebanon will be for a long time on the brink of civilian war because only and just because, in my point view, of the Hezbollah interest to be really the dominant in Lebanon. And I think that – this is my guess: I think that this conflict of today, Hezbollah will get something, will get something. At the end of this conflict, they will have, in a way, the upper hand.

MR. ELSNER: I just want to, because I know you've been rushing from meeting to meeting, read a dispatch from the Associated Press from Beirut, which reads: "Lebanon's national unity government has collapsed after Hezbollah ministers and their allies resigned over a United Nations-backed tribunal investigating the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri." The national state news agency said that 11 ministers were stepping down from the 30-minister cabinet and that's enough to bring down the government.

Does that dispatch from the AP change your assessment in any way?

MR. MIZRAHI: No. It means that now all the parties will do their best to avoid civil war. They will do, in my point of view, their best to avoid civil war and I think that they will succeed in avoiding it, paying a certain price to the Hezbollah. Which price, I don't know. But still, it will not change dramatically the fundamental situation in Lebanon which is on the brink of another showdown in six months, three months, four months or maybe more. It will be always on the brink of and it will be settled in a deal of the Syrians and Saudi Arabia.

In this round, I think that the Hezbollah will have the upper hand, which means more and more Hezbollah as the owner and the real ruler of Lebanon or, as one of the journalists once mentioned, this is an organization who has a state.

MR. ELSNER: Another question connected, from a German reporter, Ilja Tüchter of the Rheinpfalz Newspaper – excuse my pronunciation – and he wants to know, is Hezbollah now militarily stronger than in 2006, and if so, how could this happen?

MR. MIZRAHI: Well, I think in the firepower, they are stronger than they were. They have several dozen thousands of missiles, of the rockets – long-range, medium-range. So in this aspect, they are stronger. They are stronger because Iran and Syria – unfortunately only Syria – are cooperating in strengthening Hezbollah with this might, of firearms.

But at the same time, I would like to mention something: the results of the 2006 war. Since 2006 war, until today, five years of complete – a silent border in the north: We didn't have it – we never had it in the past. So we have five years, until today, which nothing is going on in the northern border of Israel and it's already five years that Hassan Nasrallah is still – made his declaration from a bunker. So in a way, I think that in a way a deterrence – some kind of deterrence was won after the 2006 war.

MR. ELSNER: And now, again, a connected question: How do you assess Israel's preparedness for a possible new conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon? And connected to that, how likely do you think such a conflict might be in the next – let's say, the next year or two?

MR. MIZRAHI: Okay. I think that at the present time, all parties has an interest not to start a war in the north. This is my point of view.

Now, what will happen now after this event today in Lebanon? What will be Hezbollah calculations? What might happen? Well, I am not sure. I always remember that in the Middle East, a minor event turns out to develop into a war. A tactical event turned to be strategic (ph) one which no one can see – can foresee.

So I don't know. But it is on the table. I would say that no one from all the players has an interest now that there will be another war. Not the Israelis, of course, not Hezbollah and not the Syrians and I think not the Iranians.

But in case Hezbollah will make its calculations that a provocation in the north will serve its interest with inside Lebanon, then it might happen. In case Iran would miscalculate and will think that it serves its interest that Hezbollah will start a war, they will do it. They might do it if they will think that the United States or Israel going to attack them or as a response to any other issue against Iran.

But for the time being, in my point of view, nobody has an interest to have another round of war between Israel and Hezbollah.

MR. ELSNER: Moving from the northern border to the southern border, I have a number of questions regarding the situation of Hamas.

One question: Is Hamas in control of the other terrorist groups in the Gaza Strip, such as the Islamic Jihad? And do you know to what extent we see we've already seen over 20 rockets, missiles, mortars fired at Israel this year – what's behind these firings and to what extent could that situation spiral out of control?

MR. MIZRAHI: Hezbollah is in full control of Gaza. They have the control. The question is not if they have the control. The question is they have the whim to control them. So I think that sometimes their interest is to control them and sometimes they will unleash their activity against Israel because of inner calculation within the Hamas because to challenge Abu Mazen's peace policy.

But do they have the control? Hundred percent they have the control. What they want, they do it. In case they see a party which in their point of view is challenging their authority, they will finish it very, very quickly, as they did several months ago against this Salafist group in Gaza. They finish it in several hours, resulting several dozens of Salafists being killed, including their head of organization. So they have the full control. No doubt of it at all.

I think that they too do not have an interest now to open a campaign or to do something that will result in an Israeli campaign against them. I think that this is not their interest now.

MR. ELSNER: Thank you. We have a number of questions about the operation that's been ascribed to the Mossad in Dubai, involving British and other passports.

One question comes from Albert Nekimken in Vienna, Virginia: What lessons has the Mossad learned from the recent operational failure in Dubai?

I guess I would ask you first if you do regard it as an operational failure and then go on to the question, if so, what lessons could be learned from it?

MR. MIZRAHI: What lessons the Mossad have after this issue supposedly (ph) that the Mossad is behind it, I don't know. I just don't know; I'm not there.

As for my point of view if this operation is a failure or not, I think that this is not a failure at all. Some mistakes were done but it is not a failure at all.

MR. ELSNER: Maybe you could expand on that. In the sense that somebody was targeted and was eliminated, I guess you could call it a success. But maybe you could outline your point of view, your analysis of the operation, its pros and cons.

MR. MIZRAHI: Well, I think that al-Mabhouh was someone that it was better that he will be neutralized so that's why, I think – that he was a pivot link between Hamas and the Iran. The message here is not only to Hamas. The message is also to the Iranians, well, let's not forget it.

The fact that he was killed and the fact that all those who were involved came back, as far as I understand, safely, then it is a success. The fact that there were some failures: Yes, there were some failures, some mistakes – sorry, not failures, some mistakes. I'm sure that the organization who is behind it will sit down, analyze it and will have his lessons from this episode. That's what I can say.

MR. ELSNER: We're ranging very widely over the Middle East. There are some questions about the situation in Iraq. One of these – hold on, sorry about this – the post-Saddam Iraq has been totally lost to Iran. Is it inevitable that we see the Shia crescent playing an increasingly belligerent role in the Middle East? That's a question from Adil Awadh.

MR. MIZRAHI: Well, yes – well, you have you what was called the Shiite crescent, first was declared by King Abdullah of Jordan and I think that in a way, he's right. As for Iraq, it seems that Iraq – it seems – that after the United States will pull out from Iraq, it seems that it will fall under Iranian influence. I will not say Iranian control but Iranian influence.

But I have to say, also, that I am not hundred percent sure, though they have their operational and military and intelligence ability to control Iran, still, let's not forget that Shiites in Iraq are not a monolith. There are those who will favor Iran, those who are against Iranian hegemony over Iraq. You have Sistani with his religious ayatollahs who has their point of view about it. You have other Shiites who are against, in my point of view of Iranian rule. Let's not forget that in the last Iraqi-Irani war, Iraqi Shiites proved that their loyalty to the state was stronger than their loyalty to their religious brothers in Iran.

So I cannot be sure 100 percent that Iraq will fall entirely, completely under Iranian control. But if I'll have to put numbers here, I think yeah, the chances are greater that – are bigger that Iran will fill the void in Iraq.

Now, if they will fill the void in Iraq and if we see a process in which Hezbollah is getting more and more control in Lebanon, then you will have Iran, Iraq and Lebanon as a powerful three states and organization – Shiite organization – that will be resulted, in my point of view, in several things. For I think that the future of Iraq will have a huge strategical result in the Middle East.

You have several questions here. Is Iraq going to be a united country? Is it going to be a democratic one? Is it going to be under – fully under – Iranian control? Is it going to be a platform to break sanctions vis-à-vis Iran? Or is it going to be a player in a defense unity vis-à-vis Iran? You have here several questions.

My point of view: that after the United States will pull out from Iraq, then the image of the United States in the Middle East will be weaker while we think – we hope – that the image of the United States in the Middle East will be a stronger one. Iran will fill the void and the question here is how it will affect their nuclear military project.

In my point of view, there, we will have a conventional race, a conventional weapons race in the Middle East as a defense against Iran of the Saudis, Jordanians and the others. I think that al-Qaida will dare much more in Iraq. Though they suffer a blow, I think that they will dare much more, though they suffer blow, I say that they will dare much more. And I think, also, that even Turkey – if Turkey will come to the conclusion that their interest in the north are threatened, are challenged, then they will dare much more.

And of course, if the Kurds will come out after the American pullout with the decision to go much more towards independence, then we are going to see a cooperation – a much more stronger cooperation of the Syrians, Iranians and the Turks. And if Iraq will be a democratic United States, which I doubt, then you will have grave implication, internally, on Iran, Saudi and Syria. I hope I answered the question.

MR. ELSNER: That brings me on to another question, which several people sent to us regarding the role of al-Qaida. The presence or non-presence, as you see it in Gaza. And also to widen the question, then situation in Yemen, where another extreme organization seems to be gaining quite a foothold. How much of a strategic threat to the United States or – and or Israel do see that has?

MR. MIZRAHI: The more – the more radical elements are having the upper hand in the Middle East, the more strategic threat it is to Middle Eastern countries, including Israel. Radicalization and radicalism in the Middle East was always, traditionally, our first enemy.

Today, the first player, the major player which leads radicalization in the Middle East are the Iranians. But also, of course, the Qaidas. The Qaidas are looking for failed states. Yemen is a wonderful example for it. They choose Yemen because it will threaten their first target – always, which was Saudi Arabia.

And it possess strategic threat on the African – what we call the African Horn, which means Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan and also Egypt as the Horn of Africa is a strategic backyard. So they choose it very, very carefully and in my point of view, very, very cleverly. And this is a real strategic threat to the West, to the United States, to the pragmatic Arabic states, first of all, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. And strategically, also, to Israel.

As for the Hamas and Qaida within Gaza Strip, let's not forget that the Qaida has their infrastructure also in Lebanon, in south Lebanon, in north Lebanon, and also in Gaza. I would say that the atmosphere for it was not deliberately done, but it was the outcome. The moment you have radical Islamic organization like the Hamas in Gaza, then someone much more radical also will find his sympathizers – his sympathizers there.

I do not think – but I have to be very frank and open – saying that I do not think that Hamas and Qaida has a lot of – in common. The thing they have in common that the both of them are radical Sunni Islamic organizations. But while Hamas has also Palestinian agenda, Qaida has not Palestinian agenda. And in a way, in my point of view, Qaida in Gaza possess a kind of competition, if not threat to the Hamas.

So sometimes, they will let them live and sometimes, they will crush them completely as they did several months ago. Sometimes they will use them as we are not the party to launch missiles or mortar fire into Israel. These are small organizations that we do not control, but they control them. So the game is, well, sometimes, I will crush them, sometimes I'll let them do something if it suits my interest.

MR. ELSNER: We're getting toward the end of this call, but I have a couple more questions. The first one, on a somewhat more humorous note, that a couple of people has asked. And that's regarding the allegations of a trained shark and vultures being recruited for the – by the Mossad for activities over various Islamic regions.

So the question is what does these rumors in the Arab world say about first of all, the Arab world, secondly about the Mossad? And do you see any future in recruiting other species, perhaps, for clandestine operations, perhaps some creatures that burrow underground like moles?

MR. MIZRAHI: (Chuckles.) Yes, a good joke, really, a good joke. But no, no, we will switch to be responsible for tsunami or earthquakes. I think it's better. It's much more – it will have much more – much more audience to (this switch ?) than bugs or other things.

Well, unfortunately, in the Middle East, let's say not provocation, but seeing – I mean the Mossad behind every corner. Unfortunately – but I'm not sure unfortunately, well, sometimes, I like it. The more they will say such things about the Mossad, the more – the more they would think that the Mossad is behind everything. Then it adds to the concept of deterrence. Let them think so – sorry for them, but because it points at a level of not unfortunately – not enough logical thinking.

MR. ELSNER: Well, before I end this call, let me just say to the people listening that we'd direct you to our website, [theisraelproject.org](http://theisraelproject.org), where we are staying abreast of the news. We – reporting on breaking news, we have a lot of content. There will be, by tomorrow, an audio pod of this call – of this call that will be posted and also a transcript.

Let me also urge you to take a look at our pages on Facebook and follow us on Twitter @israelproject, where again, we are tweeting constantly, almost around the clock with breaking news, links to other interesting articles and we're investing more and more efforts in our social media. So I just urge everyone to take a look at us on Twitter, Facebook and of course on our website.

The final question comes from Dr. Mike Evans, Middle East Media Group. “What is the most serious threat the U.S. and Israel will face in 2011?”

MR. MIZRAHI: Well, I think – I think – I am really concerned now, facing two issues, which I see as a threat. Direct to Israel is of course, Iran going nuclear early. I think this is common to us and to the United States, but not only to United States, the issue of Iran going military nuclear, it's a threat to the international community. It's not only to Israel. Believe me, we know how to defend ourselves.

But I think it will have grave consequences on international community, not only in the United States. So I would say Iran is the first one. But the second thing which it does not have a direct implication on the Middle East or on Israel, but indirect one, which really worries me is the situation in Pakistan.

MR. ELSNER: Well, that could be the subject of a whole other call. But in the meantime, I want to thank Ilan Mizrahi for his giving his time so generously to us today. It's been a very wide-ranging call. Let me also thank all the people who sent in questions. I hope I got through most of them.

And let me also thank anyone who just called in to listen. I hope you found it interesting and illuminating. We hope to have regular calls through the course of the year. But for the meantime, let me just say I wish everybody a very happy new year and say goodbye from Washington, D.C.

(END)