

THE ISRAEL PROJECT

THE NEW STRATEGIC SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

WELCOME/MODERATOR:

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SPEAKER:

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MR. ALAN ELSNER: First of all, let me just welcome everybody around the country and around the world to this conference call by The Israel Project. And our guest today is Brigadier General in the Reserves Yossi Kuperwasser, who is the director-general of Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs. And he'll be talking about the new strategic situation unfolding in the Middle East, probably with special reference to Iran. And also he may take this opportunity to discuss his ministry's new peace, culture and incitement index.

General Kuperwasser is taking part in a conference, the Jerusalem Conference for International Policy Seminar on Capitol Hill today. And he is one of a very distinguished roster of speakers. The opening speaker is the Israeli Ambassador to Washington Michael Oren.

Yossi Kuperwasser, as I said, is the director-general of Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs, and has served in a number of senior roles in the Israel Defense Forces. He headed the research and assessment division of Israeli military intelligence. Previously, he was the senior intelligence officer of the IDF's central command. The Ministry of Strategic Affairs coordinates security intelligence and diplomatic initiatives regarding Iran and other strategic threats.

And now, just a few words about The Israel Project for those of you not familiar with our work. The Israel Project is a nonprofit, educational organization that gets facts about Israel and the Middle East to the press, public officials and the public at large. We are not affiliated with any government. We have a team of multilingual experts and former reporters, including myself. We provide journalists and leaders with fact sheets, backgrounders and sources. We regularly hold press conferences and briefings featuring leading Israeli spokespeople and analysts.

And the aim is to provide the media with facts, context and the visuals that they need in order to cover this very complex story with the balance and the depth and the information that they need.

And then – and now without further ado, I'm going to turn it over to Yossi Kuperwasser to make some opening remarks, which will be followed by questions. Yossi, over to you.

BRIGADIER GENERAL YOSSI KUPERWASSER: Thank you very much. And good morning, everybody. With so much happening at the same time, to have a really brief opening remark – (chuckles) – is not easy. But I'll try to do it nevertheless.

I'll say that what we are involved with today is the attempt to define – you can say that it's a defining moment because it's about defining the moment. What is it that we are watching? Is it the reform, the democratization and modernization reform? Or is it the awakening of an Islamic nationalistic new era in the Middle East?

And we have on the one hand those who are interested in the first definition. Clearly, the United States is leading this group. And on the other hand, we have Iran, radical Muslim groups like al-Qaida and, of course, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood one, who is in the best position who are in the – who are in the best position to take advantage of the situation, who are trying to characterize this situation, this Islamic or nationalistic awakening. And of course, even within

them, it's not one bloc. Everybody is trying to push the events into the direction that's best suited for him.

That being said, what's important is that for the time being, the changes in the Middle East are not in the sense that the orientation of the countries involved is changing. Both Egypt and Tunisia, where you – where we had some sort of a decapitation are still committed to keeping their orientation, the Western orientation, even if there are going to be major changes over there. And kind of relations with the West might be a little bit colder than they were in the past.

But where changes can occur that would involve some sort of a change of orientation is exactly in those cases where the regimes are so keen on preventing any threat to the stability because they know it's not about the leader; it's about the entire regime. And this is true mainly about Iran and, to some extent, also about Syria, of course. And in this current case of Libya, this is also true. So this is where we stand right now in a very small description of the situation right now.

Israel, in this respect, of course, is interested being – not staying the only democracy in the United States – in the Middle East. We would like very much to see more democracies in the Middle East, hoping that can be – (inaudible, audio interference) – eventually will lead to some sort of a better relations between Israel's neighbors and the other countries in the region.

At the same time, of course, Israel is concerned that this new revolution – (audio interference) – move by radicalization and taking power by Muslim Brotherhood-kind elements because they are in much better positions right now to take advantage of the situation.

So because of that, we believe that this process should be done in a very cautious and a moving-toward manner so that we should make sure that the outcome will be the one that everybody in the West will be interested in.

At the same time, we think that we should not lose contact with the Iranian issue, which is still the most dangerous development in the Middle East. And we should continue to – (inaudible) – much better especially when the Iranian regime is – (inaudible) – to give up the nuclear project. It's still making progress in spite of the – some achievements in the efforts to slow it down. This is still the area where the future of the Middle East is going to be decided more than anywhere else. And that's why we think that Iran seems to be a very high priority for everybody.

Contrary to – (inaudible) – his opening remarks to the Palestinian – (inaudible) – unfortunately there's been events happening around us. It seems that the Palestinians are not very much interested in having any kind of negotiations with Israel. They believe that the unilateral track is much more promising from their point of view. And if there's – (inaudible) – that they are now going to review the issue of their relations with Hamas. To some extent this is because they lost some of their supporters. And to a lot – to a lot less extent, it's because they're – what they consider to be their success in the vote on the settlements in the Security Council. And they believe that September will be the main success for them.

In that respect, what drives them to go this way is that they believe that this is the way in which they can have a free lunch. And we get a recognition in the Palestinian state to more or less in the '67 line and, at the same time, not pay the price of accepting Israel's security requirements, and moreover, avoiding the need to accept Israel's right – to recognize Israel's right to exist as the nation-state of the Jewish people. These are the two things that are – they are most concerned with paying.

Talking about the last issue, it's also – it also referred to the issue of the refugees. And what we're seeing with the index we are conducting for, now, more than a year, is that it is very constant that we have – we have made four elements. One is incitement for violence, or, immediate violence; second is encouraging an atmosphere that supports violence and terror; third is an index that follows the issues of demonization and hatred; and the fourth is an index that follows the level to which the Palestinians are building a culture of this, accepting the idea of the other, in which the Jews also have some rights.

In as far as the first index is concerned, one that speaks about this direct incitement for immediate violence, I think the Palestinians are relatively cautious. And on a scale of minus-100 and plus-100, they stand at minus-10, or something like that.

But with the other three, the encouragement of cultural violence, the incitement for hatred and demonization and the question of building a culture of peace – on those three issues, they are in a very bad position. This is reflected in their textbooks, in the way their leaders speak, in the way their culture, that they are promoting where they're – respective.

And all of those issues, we see a very bad situation that their numbers are somewhat between minus-40 and minus-50, which is a major concern for us because we believe that in order to promote peace in the Middle East, first of all, there's got to be changes in the attitude of Palestinians on this issue of the rights of the – of the Jewish people in the land of Israel. And this is not the case so far.

And neither the issue of readiness to use violence and terrorism in order to promote the Palestinian causes they define are still sending the message to people that these tools are legitimate. Maybe right now we shouldn't use them. They are not paying off at this stage, but they are – (inaudible) – clearly legitimate tools. This is something that we are worried because – (inaudible) – we have learned we need to be concerned about whether any – (inaudible) – in the future will be a stable, durable one.

That should be in a nutshell. Questions, please.

MR. ELSNER: OK. We have a lot of questions here from people who have submitted. First one, Susan Cornwell of Reuters wants to know:

Does the situation unfolding in Egypt, in Libya and elsewhere in the Middle East strengthen Israel's needs for security guarantees such as an Israeli military presence along the eastern border of future Palestinian state?

BRIG. GEN. KUPERWASSER: Well, in a way, yes. But I think that this demand doesn't need that many events to – (inaudible); the demand for control over the entrance to the Palestinian territories, and if there is going to be a Palestinian territory or a Palestinian state in the – in the Judea and Samaria area is something that is clear because of what happened so far in those areas that we have evacuated in the past – both in Gaza and in Lebanon. What happened over in those two places was since there was no real monitoring and control, those two areas became full with long-range rockets and all kinds of weapons that were then used against us.

And this lesson is clear and it's bad in Lebanon and Gaza, but if this is going to be the case in Palestinian-controlled territories in the West Bank, the situation is going to be even much worse because everything is so close. The proximity of these areas to the center of Israel is such that you cannot afford something like that.

What we learned from the recent events is that in the end of the day, security measures that are agreed upon stand, and because of that, they are so important. And secondly, that it is extremely important to have a peace agreement in the hope that these developments eventually would lead to a peace; to the peace agreement being accepted by the – by the people, and not only by the leaders.

But it is very important peace agreements with the people with a representative government and not only with a government that is – (inaudible) – legitimacy – (inaudible) – is a question. And in this respect, we need security and peace with the people. And the recent events have proven how much it is important.

MR. ELSNER: There's a question from Scott McConnell of the – the editor of the American Conservative. And he's asking: Has anything changed so far in Egypt's policies toward Israel and Gaza? And what changes would you anticipate?

BRIG. GEN. KUPERWASSER: I don't see any changes, like, not in the Israeli policy towards Gaza or the West Bank. We have said for a long time that we want to have a peaceful – a peace agreement, peaceful relations with our Palestinian neighbor. And we don't want to control the Palestinians and, actually, we have an agreement that builds the – (inaudible) – by already separating politically and in many other respects the Palestinians from Israel. And after we left Gaza, they can control Gaza and they do. And they control most of the people – almost all of the people in the West Bank living under their political system, their education system, their economic system, so on, so forth.

So this has been the policy of Israel for a very long time. We need an agreement that would settle all open issues between us. And the most important issues for us – this is something people have to understand – the most important issue for us is the issue of recognition which is the basis, also, for security. If you don't have the other side recognize your rights, then security is never going to be really provided.

And so on top of the security arrangements, in this regard, we need this recognition. And this is what the dispute is all about. It's not about whether the Palestinians are going to have a

state because there's no changing in the Israeli policy. For a long time, the Israelis have accepted the idea that the Palestinians can have a state of their own. But the issue is whether Israelis can have a nation-state for the Jewish people, the fact that the Palestinian leadership continues to deny. And this is, as I said before, is also reflected in their attitude to the refugee problem.

This is the main stumbling block on the road to peace. And as long as this is not being settled and the Palestinians continue to deny, what can be achieved right now is we have to look for stages on the way towards this achievement because maybe the Palestinians are not ready yet. And for that, we are more than happy to move on a track of – the bottom-up track, where the Palestinians can have a better government, better economy, better law and order.

And we hope that this will be accompanied, also, with the bottom-up change in the attitude towards education because of what I had described before of the education, the messages and the way they are indoctrinated to deny the right of the Jews, to hate them and to demonize them and to support the idea of the legitimacy of the use of force, this is something that has to change if we want to have a durable peace.

And so we need a bottom-up process that can be accompanied, also, with a top-down discussion on the way all the operations will be resolved in the context of an agreement. This process is going to take some time. We cannot believe that we can reach an agreement overnight.

So this is where we stand; this was – has been our policy on this; is our policy. And now it is going to be articulated – (inaudible) – we shall have to wait and see – (inaudible) – government is working on these issues as we speak.

MR. ELSNER: There have been several questions that were submitted about the new Egyptian government and particularly the new foreign minister, Nabil al-Arabi, who was a representative – a judge on the international court and has made some rather hostile remarks toward Israel in the past.

Do you have any concerns about his emergence? And do you think it might affect the bilateral relationship?

BRIG. GEN. KUPERWASSER: We have no intention to interfere in internal Egyptian affairs. They are entitled to nominate whoever they want as minister. Our interest is to have stable and strong relations with Egypt. And we expect the Egyptian government to share with us the same aspiration.

Being neighbors and partners to an agreement that stands for quite a long time and has been benefitting both sides for such a long time, we believe that we should continue – both sides should continue to cooperate and find a way to – despite what has happened, find a way to help each other and cooperate also on the peaceful way that Egypt is going to be involved in the peace process.

We always welcome that and I think that's an option for the future as well. Right now, the Egyptians are more busy with internal affairs. But we have a big appreciation for the role of Egypt in the peace process in the region and we expect Egypt to stick to this role in the future as well. We have nothing to say about the internal affairs of Egypt, really.

MR. ELSNER: There are a number of questions revolving around Iran and the status of the nuclear program and what the Stuxnet computer worm may or may not have done to that program. What is your best assessment of where things are now?

BRIG. GEN. KUPERWASSER: Well the Iran issue is made, actually, three elements of power affecting each other and three consultations. The one that you referred to is the question of to what extent the Iranians are using the time in order to improve their ability to acquire the nuclear weapons once they decided to move fast-forward in this direction.

There's been an ongoing effort of the Iranians to prepare the infrastructure for such a (need ?) by both enriching the uranium to as high a level they can without causing somebody to – (inaudible) – real actions against them, and by making progress on technical issues that would have to be encountered once they start this fast-forward effort and by improving their ability to defend themselves if they start this fast-forward stage.

And on the other hand, they're ready to move in that direction. They encounter all kinds of problems, like what you mentioned, that slow down their progress. Having said that, I think that eventually they do make some progress and any progress they make is an alarming situation. The fact that according to the last report of the IAEA, the Iranians already have more than 5,000 centrifuges working whereas, before, what was attributed – (inaudible) – of this document they had less than 4,000 tells you that the impact was not dramatic.

The fact that they already have more than 3,600 kilograms of highly – of lowly enriched uranium and more than 40 kilograms of uranium enriched to 19.75 percent is clearly a source of concern for everybody.

And on the other hand, we have been watching to see what they do. And the improved centrifuges have not yet been to operation and the issue of the facility in Qom, what's going to be a threat from over there. A lot of this – a complicated issue.

But all in all, I think that they are making progress and it could be – being better prepared to this fast-forward chapter that is supposed to bring them to the position where they have a nuclear arsenal. Any assessment of how long this is going to take – well, I think it's impossible to assess those things with accuracy, but we can only say, oh, that's a success that – (inaudible) – it's going to take them something like a year today. But life is never successfully – (inaudible). It's very difficult to say. That's where we stand on the nuclear issue.

But there are two other issues that – concerning Iran that are not less important. First of all, there is the issue of the Iranian attempt to take advantage of the situation in the Middle East in order to say: We are winning; the other side is losing. And this is the first time I've referred to before, the question of what is actually happening here.

The Iranians, of course, drew hope from the fact that two friends of the United States have had to leave the office and that their replacements, in their mind – in the Iranian mind – are going to be farther away from the United States and from the West compared with their predecessors. That's something that the Iranians see as a positive development.

On the other hand, I'm sure that they are not ignoring the possibility that eventually this development might end up in a situation where you have more democracy in the Middle East and a stronger Arab center of gravity that is going to be developing on the expense of the Iranian center of gravity.

So this is an open question and the way it's going to develop is going to depend a lot on what the Iranians are going to do on the one hand but also on what the West is going to do on the other. And I think that the West is aware of the fact that something has to be done in this respect whether the free world will have a friend or at least a potential friend in the Middle East, not somebody who is trying to get away. That's one thing.

And the last thing that we have to remember about Iran is that with all of that happening, it has an impact on the – in terms of the domestic scene in Iran. The issue of the – the nuclear issue was affecting it in certain situations through the sanctions and the development – the events in the Middle East are affecting the situation in Iran in the sense that they give, again, some hopes to the opposition in Iran and forced already the government to take steps in order to mitigate the effect of this development, just including the moving of – the ousting of Rafsanjani from his position today.

So there's a – there's a battle happening underground in Iran and, right now, the funny thing is that this development which is so important attracts relatively low attention from the international community even though if there is anything that is going to determine how the Middle East is going to look like in the future, this is exactly this battle.

MR. ELSNER: Okay. We're coming toward the end of this call because we know you have a busy day. Let me just ask one last question about Lebanon, which was very much in the headlines a few weeks ago; it's basically been overshadowed by what's happening elsewhere in the Middle East.

But at the time, it was widely reported Hezbollah was about to basically take over the government. And Hezbollah, as we know, has 40 (thousand), maybe 50,000 rockets aimed at Israel. What's your assessment of the situation there in Lebanon?

BRIG. GEN. KUPERWASSER: Well, I think that Lebanon is a special case. In the past, Lebanon used to be the microcosm of the Arab world and everybody was looking at Lebanon to know what's happening in the Arab world. But with the events of the last two months – (inaudible) – is unraveling. So it's becoming more a private case of Lebanon.

In this private case, of course, the last events limits picture. On the one hand, Hezbollah is having a bigger share in the government. And the fact that they forced Hariri out is an achievement from their point of view.

On the other hand, the question of whether Hezbollah should be allowed to continue to have its arms – the question of what other repercussions of the fact that Hezbollah is going totally to be indicted on the matter of Prime Minister Hariri – these are the things that are going to have a limiting effect on Hezbollah anyhow.

And we see that the opposition there is strong enough in order to say, we are not going to cave in, in front of the pressure of the pressures. This prevents, for the time being Mikati from forming a government. So it's an open situation but, basically, it's an internal problem for the Lebanese that, for the time being, its impact on the Israeli side is limited. If any, it might have some impact in the future. So far, this is not the case. And we are watching. We are watching them; we're hoping that Lebanon will find also the way to become a rich democracy that takes care of its own people and cares much less about causing trouble to Israel.

MR. ELSNER: Well, I want to thank Yossi Kuperwasser for spending his time with us. It's been very interesting and enlightening and we've covered quite a lot of ground in quite a short amount of time.

Before I sign off, let me just tell people that we are constantly upgrading our website, theisraelproject.org. We're adding interactive maps and other features all the time. We have a wealth of information there so I urge people to check it out. Follow us on Twitter, @IsraelProject, and Facebook – become fans, see everything that's going on, join our little community, The Israel Project. And we are hoping to have more interesting speakers at regular intervals as we move forward.

So, once again, thank you very much, Yossi, for your time and for your expertise. And I'm going to say good afternoon from Washington. Bye-bye.

BRIG. GEN. KUPERWASSER: Thank you.

(END)