

# **The Israel Project**

**Conference Call with Ambassador Michael Oren**

**Welcome and Moderator:  
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**Speaker:  
Ambassador Michael B. Oren,  
Israeli Ambassador to the United States**

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JENNIFER MIZRAHI: Thank you very much and welcome. This is Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, and on behalf of The Israel Project, a non-profit educational organization, we're very delighted today to have a very special speaker, Ambassador Michael Oren. A graduate of Princeton and Columbia, Dr. Oren has received fellowships from the U.S. Departments of State and Defense and from the British and Canadian governments.

Formerly, he was the Lady Davis fellow of Hebrew University and Moshe Dayan fellow at Tel Aviv University and a distinguished fellow at the Shalem Center in Jerusalem. He has been a visiting professor at Harvard, Yale and Georgetown. Ambassador Oren has written extensively for The Wall Street Journal, New York Times, New Republic and other places.

His two most recent books, "Six Days of War: June, 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East" and "Power, Faith and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776-Present" were both New York Times best-sellers. They won the Los Angeles Times history book of the year prize and a National Council of the Humanities award and the national Jewish book award. Those books are available at the website of The Israel project that connects you to Amazon, and I highly recommend them for your summer reading.

Raised in New Jersey, where he was an activist in Zionist youth movements and a gold medal-winning athlete in the Maccabiah Games, he moved to Israel in the 1970s. He served as an officer in the IDF, in the paratroopers in the Lebanon War, a liaison with the U.S. 6<sup>th</sup> fleet during the Gulf War, as an IDF spokesman during the second Lebanon War and the Gaza operation in January of 2009.

He acted as an Israeli emissary to the Jewish refuseniks in the Soviet Union, as an advisor to Israel's delegations to the United Nations, and as the government's director of inter-government – inter-religious affairs. Most of all, he is very special to The Israel Project. We are a huge fan of his work and of course the U.S.-Israel relationship. So Ambassador Michael Oren, thank you for joining us today.

AMBASSADOR MICHAEL OREN: Pleasure, Jennifer. Thank you for that very warm introduction. Thank you for saying nice things about my book, because by law, I can no longer do so. And I'm always delighted and honored to be working in partnership with The Israel Project. I have been working with The Israel Project for many years now, both in this capacity and before it in some pretty tough situations. And The Israel Project, I can say, does outstanding work in explaining the complexities of the Middle East and the interests and perspectives of Israel as we confront those complexities.

And right now, those complexities have reached an all-time high, even by Middle Eastern standards. As you know, the entire Middle East is in the throes of upheaval, widely called in this country the Arab Spring. And Israel looks at the situation and sees both risks as well as opportunities.

The risks we know from our experience. We knew that in Iran, in Lebanon and in Gaza, largely democratic, secular, pro-democracy movements were hijacked by extremists who transformed those regions into terrorist strongholds. In the case of Lebanon and Gaza, those

terrorist strongholds ended up being also launching pads for firing thousands and thousands of missiles at Israeli civilians, at our farms and cities and towns. So we know very well, from personal and painful experience, how a seemingly positive, democratizing process can be transformed.

Looking closer at the situation, we're concerned about the internal political mood within Egypt. Nobody knows what's going to happen in Egypt, but it appears that – it appears very chaotic there, certainly in the Sinai Peninsula, where there is a population of about 400,000 Bedouin who are not particularly enamored of the Egyptian government. They have been striking at the gas pipeline that supplies Israel with 40 percent of its gas under an agreement we have with the Egyptian government.

Now, we've just this week had the third largest – the third explosion of that gas pipeline. The Bedouin are doing this not just to get at the Egyptian – not just to strike the Egyptians, but to extort money from them. But the gas has not been restored, the gas supply. As of today, about 30 percent of our gas supply is going through. And that causes difficulties for us. It's not only a violation of agreement between us and the Egyptians, but also a problem environmentally and economically. So we have to import more expensive and polluting coal and oil to make up for the loss of natural gas.

The situation in Egypt is also a source of concern because in this chaotic environment, those organizations that are best organized and funded and most clearly led will emerge regnant there. And right now, those organizations are the Islamic extremist organizations, the Muslim Brotherhood as well as others. And their commitment to the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt is very much in question. They certainly don't accept the legitimacy of the state of Israel. And I don't think they would be particularly disturbed about the way – if Israel to disappear, were that the case.

Keep in mind that the Hamas organization of the Palestinians, recognized by the United States and the world community as a terrorist organization, is a branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. So there's a direct connection there with terror.

But it's not only the Muslim Brotherhood. Today, in the press, you'll see the leader of the Wafd Party in Egypt, a secular, democratic movement, this leader of the Wafd Party coming out and denying the Holocaust, saying that Osama bin Laden was an agent of the United States, that 9/11 was perpetrated by American leaders to vilify the Arab world.

So if such statements are coming by the secular and democratic leadership in Egypt, what can we expect from the radicals? It's a source of concern.

Looking to our north to Syria, here we see – we see some opportunities. It is not the case – and I cannot stress this enough – that we prefer to deal with the devil we know, the devil being Bashir al-Assad and his Ba'athist regime. It is hard for us to conceive of someone who would be more devilish than Mr. Assad. Here is a person who has been instrumental in providing 50,000 rockets to Hezbollah in Lebanon, well over 10,000 rockets to Hamas in Gaza. As a result of those rockets, every single city in the state of Israel can be targeted, either from Gaza or from

Lebanon. He himself has a massive arsenal of rockets with unconventional warheads that can be placed upon them.

He has been – Mr. Assad has been involved in the murder of Lebanese politicians, including former Lebanese leader Rafik Hariri. Just now, the international tribunal has been handing down indictments of leader – leading Hezbollah figures who are directly linked to Syria, and through Syria to Iran. And Syria has also maintained a very close alliance with the Iranians. Syria has been widely reported to have tried to develop its own military nuclear arsenal.

Perhaps the only redeeming quality that Mr. Assad had in our eyes was that he kept a quiet border with us, he and his father for the last 40-some-odd years. But even that now has been removed, as the Assad regime has been promoting Palestinian – attempts by Palestinians to violently infiltrate our border, not with the goal of protesting for greater jobs and democracy but with the goal of destroying the Jewish state. And we know that the Syrian regime has been directly involved in both promoting and financing and facilitating those attempts to violate our border.

And now the Syrians are firing – the Syrian government is firing on its own citizens, who are protesting for freedom, protesting for the right to vote as they see fit and killing many, many hundreds of them, including today. That's the situation in Syria.

If that regime were to fall, we see benefits. We see opportunities. We see a loosening of the Syrian grip on Lebanon. We see an unraveling, potentially, of the Syrian alliance with Iran. There could be benefits there if Syria focuses on its internal wellbeing and not on fomenting terror and unrest throughout the entire region – an opportunity.

Broadly speaking, Israel knows from history that democratic governments are better at keeping peace agreements than either autocracies or dictatorships and that if people are genuinely invested in their government; they have an interest in maintaining the peace. And should peace-loving democracies emerge in the Arab world, and maybe Iran as well, Israel will be proud to say that once upon a time, we were the only democracy in the Middle East and now we're prouder and happier still to say that we are one of many functioning democracies in the Middle East.

We are at a crucial juncture in our relationship with Turkey. Turkey is an extremely important power in the Middle East. Our policy toward Turkey has never changed, not one iota, but Turkey's policy toward us has changed with the emergence of the Erdogan government, with a more Islamic orientation.

Turkey canceled joint exercises between the Israeli forces – Israel defense forces and the Turkish army. Those maneuvers went on for 14 years. It was a year before last year's flotilla when those exercises were canceled unilaterally by the Turks. And the Turks had developed very close relationships with Hamas, with Iran and with Syria and adopted a very cold attitude to us, and a very critical attitude toward us.

But we haven't given up. And as we speak, as I speak, today there are efforts and talks underway between representatives of the Israeli government and representatives of the Turkish government in an attempt to get our relationship on a better footing. We have no illusions, we're not naïve and think it's going to go back to the way it was, say, in 2002. But we look forward to a better relationship with Turkey. And we understand that Turkey is an important ally of the United States as well. And that the – this sort of triangular relationship between the United States, Turkey and Israel is an important strategic configuration for us all.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sent a letter of congratulations to Mr. Erdogan on his reelection, again expressing the hope that we can ameliorate our relationship. And we were heartened to see that Turkey withdrew its support from another flotilla that was set to arrive off the Gaza coast this week. And the Turkish decision was instrumental in undermining that flotilla's attempt to break a maritime blockade which Israel has maintained for several years now over Hamas-controlled Gaza.

The legality of that maritime blockade has been upheld by the State Department, by the government in Britain and by the U.N. So it's a legal blockade. We were happy to see that Turkey backed off of the effort of supporting the efforts to violate our legally maintained blockade. That is the good news.

On the peace process front, here too we're at a crucial juncture. Over the last several weeks Israel has been engaged in rather intense talks with the United States over ways in which we can draft a common platform for moving the peace process forward, taking elements of President Obama's speeches, issues that are of great importance to us, particularly relating to security, and our recognition as a Jewish state, by which we mean that Palestinian refugees will not be returning to Israel but to the Palestinian state. It means that there'll be an end of claims and end of conflict. Once we sign the peace agreement, that is it. There will be peace. That peace is not just merely a stage to another – to another segment of the conflict.

So we are in close consultation and coordination with the Obama administration about this with the goal of arriving at a common document which can then be presented to the Europeans, to the Quartet, which will be convening in Washington on July 11<sup>th</sup>, and then gaining a generally – a general sort of international consensus about how we can move forth on the peace process, and hope that that common position will then convince or dissuade the Palestinians from pursuing their current course.

And their current course is A, to make a reconciliation pact with Hamas, again a violation of all our agreements with the Palestinian Authority as well as America's agreements with the Palestinian Authority – a reconciliation with a terrorist organization committed to Israel's destruction. And then, the Palestinian Authority has insisted that it will not return to negotiations but instead go to the United Nations in the fall and seek unilateral international recognition of Palestinian statehood which is, again, a violation of all the Palestinian Authority's agreements with us going back to the 1993 Oslo Accords which says expressly that there's no alternative to direct negotiations.

By the way, the United States is a co-signatory to those accords. So by seeking unilateral recognition in the U.N., the Palestinian Authority is also violating its agreements with the United State. And there are no few – no shortage of members of Congress who have expressed deep opposition to this, and opposition on the part of the Obama administration as well. Secretary of State Clinton has said that there – again, has repeated – that there is no alternative to direct negotiations. And President Obama says that the unilaterally declared Palestinian state will bring neither statehood nor peace to the Palestinians. And we appreciate that support and the support of others in the world who are poised to oppose the Palestinian unilateral move in September.

But our hope, again, is to return to the negotiating table. The state of Israel – the government of Israel remains thoroughly committed to direct negotiations leading to a – leading swiftly to an agreement out of which will emerge a durable, viable, legitimate two-state solution: a Palestinian state that will serve as the homeland, a nation-state of the Palestinian people, and Israel, which will be the nation-state and homeland of the Jewish people. That is our – that is our goal. And we are, again, deeply dedicated to achieving it as swiftly as possible.

Perhaps our deepest concern is that while the world has been focused on what's happening elsewhere on the field of the Middle East – and again, there are many things happening on that field – the Iranians have been obscured from view. The Iranians are literally stealing bases while the people in the stands are looking elsewhere. And what have the Iranians been doing?

Well, the Iranians have been providing arms and money – arms and money to the Syrians and aiding the Assad regime to suppress the democracy movement in his country. And this is in spite of the fact that Iran has been subject to sanctions that have taken a serious bite out of the Iranian economy, even during these periods of great economic distress in Iran. They find – the Iranian regime finds enough money to give to Bashar al-Assad in order to ensure his survival.

The Iranians, again, have been implicated in the murders in Lebanon through Hezbollah. Iranian – Iran has been involved in shooting at American soldiers, killing at least eight of them in the last week and a half with missiles that have been imported directly from Iran. The United States indicated that Iranians have been involved in supporting of the Taliban. We see an immense increase in Iranian military involvement in these areas. A brazenness – a brazenness at a time of great – again, when focus on the region is falling elsewhere and not on Iran.

Iran has overcome the technical – the technical difficulties it experienced last year in its nuclear program. According to both Israeli-American sources, as well as the International Atomic Energy Agency, Iran is now producing enriched uranium at a rate that is very impressive, is producing – is enriching uranium at pace, and increasing that enrichment rate to much higher level, about 20 percent, at the same time it is very rigorously pursuing its missile development program with missiles that can hit anywhere in the Middle East and even parts of Southern Europe at this point. And within five years, 10 years they'll be able to reach the eastern coast of the United States as well.

All of this is going on in Iran at a time when the regime is still openly committed to destroying Israel, denying the Holocaust. Iran – we hope that in spite of the great distractions

going on in the Middle East, and they are significant distractions, that the international community will regain its focus on Iran and work swiftly and decisively to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear military capabilities and to stem the spread of a rather pernicious Iranian hegemony throughout the Middle East.

With all this going on, Israel itself, if you come to Israel, you'll find a country that is doing very well economically with the lowest unemployment rate its history, low inflation, solid growth – one of the highest levels of growth in the OECD countries which Israel joined last year. Tourism is at an all-time high. 2010, we had the greatest tourist – tourism year in our history. This year we are exceeding it so far by 27 percent. Israel is – the food is great. We're exporting wine to France. And we are generally – it's thriving in so many ways and in spite of the great challenges we face.

And we appreciate our historic alliance with the United States which supports us on the security field and supports us in international forums, opposing the flotilla, opposing attempts to delegitimize us throughout the world. It is a – truly an historic and absolutely vital alliance for the state of Israel.

So I am going to stop there. We've covered an awful lot of space. I don't know how much time we have for questions. Apparently they're signaling that we have no time for questions.

How about one or two?

MS. MIZRAHI: My understanding – that your timing would very limited, and that we wouldn't get to have questions.

AMB. OREN: OK.

MS. MIZRAHI: So grateful, Ambassador, that you were able to be with us for this special call. We so appreciate the work that you're doing for Israel here in the United States. I will say additionally that The Israel Project is deeply grateful for the work you're doing in helping us on our upcoming visit to Israel, where we will be bringing a delegation of ambassadors to the United States who have never been to Israel before and will be joining us on a delegation there. So I want to thank you and your office for your assistance in making that possible, and for everything that you do.

Additionally, I just want to remind our listeners that tomorrow we have a conference call on a topic that Ambassador Oren mentioned. And that is Iran. Our conference call tomorrow is on Iran's missile program, current capabilities and future directions with Uzi Rubin, who is an incredible genius on these issues. And so we'll get more details on these programs later.

Ambassador Oren, thank you for everything you do. And thank you for being with us today.

AMB. OREN: Great pleasure, Jennifer. And thank you for all you do.

MS. MIZRAHI: Thank you.

AMB. OREN: Be well.

(END)