

Hudson Event

Transcript

Is Israel the Biggest Loser of the Syrian Civil War?

Mike Doran:

[00:00:13] Hi, I'm Mike Duran.

[00:00:15] I'm the director of the Center for Peace and Security in the Middle East at the Hudson Institute in Washington, D.C.

[00:00:22] And I'm joined today by two very distinguished guests.

[00:00:25] That's Ehud Yaari and Zohar Palti, both Israelis with many, many decades of experience in international relations, and especially, of course, international relations in the Middle East.

[00:00:38] And we're here today to talk about a very provocative essay that Ehud Yaari has written in the Jerusalem Sentinel, arguing that Israel has lost the war in Syria.

[00:00:50] It's a provocative essay because it goes against the consensus or near consensus of the Israeli security establishment about the success of Israel's operations in Syria, which have prevented Syria in the view of the establishment of becoming a second Lebanon that is a base for offensive Iranian operations against the against Israel**[00:01:15]** But I won't describe this any more.

[00:01:17] Let's turn now to let's turn now to Ehud Yaari to give us, if you will, Ehud, a quick summary of your argument and and the importance of it.

[00:01:27] Thank you. AMERICAN CENTER FOR LEVANT STUDIES

Ehud Yaari:

[00:01:29] Thank you, Mike.

[00:01:30] Pleasure being at the Hudson Institute.

[00:01:34] I will put it briefly.

[00:01:37] I wrote this article after having tried to lobby since March 2011.

[00:01:48] The Israeli Prime Minister.

[00:01:50] The general staff.

[00:01:51] Et cetera.

[00:01:52] To take a more proactive attitude to the developments of the civil war in Syria.

[00:02:03] I felt throughout that Israel was not taking advantage of an opportunity that presented itself to get rid of Iran's most important ally in the region.

[00:02:18] President Assad of Syria, who serves as the link between Iraq and the Iraqi and the Iranian sponsored militias in Iraq and Hezbollah.

[00:02:30] Et cetera.

[00:02:33] My argument is simple.

[00:02:36] I think that between March 2011, when the uprising erupted in Daraa, very close to the Israeli border and the Golan, and September 2015, when the Iranians, General Qassem Soleimani, managed to not too difficult to convince President Putin to send his air force to Syria.

[00:03:03] I saw that we could have helped the rebel factions in this array as they were.

[00:03:11] I have no illusions about what was the picture there.

[00:03:15] Get to the southern gates of Damascus.

[00:03:19] There were several ways to do it.

[00:03:22] Uh, not the Israeli boots on the ground.

[00:03:26] Yes, some air force activity.

[00:03:30] But the Israeli decision that's primarily Prime Minister Netanyahu.

[00:03:36] The Israeli decision was we don't want to take the risk of a jihadist takeover in Damascus.

[00:03:45] We need an address on the other side of the border.

[00:03:51] And therefore, everything that was done and things were done were lukewarm.

[00:03:57] I'll give one example.

[00:03:59] I think that if Israel bombed.

[00:04:07] Which we do almost weekly now.

[00:04:10] If Israel bombed at the time the chain of military bases protecting Damascus from the south.

[00:04:17] Kiswa Kanaker

[00:04:23] I forgot the third one.

[00:04:26] Now, we would have we would have opened the way for the rebels to get to Damascus.

[00:04:34] And we shouldn't forget Assad was already packed to go.

[00:04:40] His forces in the South.

[00:04:42] Were destroyed.

[00:04:45] The frontline divisions, 60 and 91 stopped to exist.

[00:04:52] Generally, the First Corps was not there.

[00:04:56] So there were things we could do.

[00:04:59] We did bits of it later.

[00:05:01] Too late.

[00:05:03] But we missed an opportunity and we missed an opportunity because the syndrome of the first Lebanon War, 82, Israel trying to change the lay of the political land in Lebanon has backfired.

[00:05:21] And since then, both the military and the defense establishment and certainly the politicians are reluctant from taking what they see as adventures.

[00:05:33] Across the border.

[00:05:35] So we have basically allowed Assad to stay.

[00:05:42] In my opinion, that was a strategic failure.

[00:05:48] The Prime Minister Netanyahu didn't like the this term, but never mind.

[00:05:57] I use it very often on television.

[00:05:59] And we have suffered a strategic failure in Syria because our major interest was to deprive Iran of this ally in Damascus.

[00:06:13] There was an opportunity.

[00:06:15] It was missed.

Mike Doran:

[00:06:17] Can I just ask you to, before we move to Zohar to briefly explain why it's a failure?

[00:06:26] What do the Iranians now have in Syria that is strategically threatening to Israel?

Ehud Yaari:

[00:06:34] Well, the Iranians were not allowed mainly by the Israeli air force to build on Syrian territory, their own war machine.

[00:06:45] We don't know.

[00:06:46] Hundreds of launching pads of missiles, air defense systems.

[00:06:51] Et cetera.

[00:06:52] Et cetera.

[00:06:52] Et cetera.

[00:06:53] That was the plan.

[00:06:54] This is the original Qassem Soleimani plan that was foiled.

[00:07:01] The Israeli military will tell you 80%, 90% of it was destroyed by the Israeli air Force in very frequent raids on Iranian targets in Syria.

[00:07:15] But what I see is the other side, the other half of the glass, I see, a, that the Iranians are willing to pay a very steep price.

[00:07:27] Just in order to continue that there are incrementally.

[00:07:33] Keeping penetrating Syria.

[00:07:35] I'm speaking militarily.

[00:07:38] A building bases zones of influence from the mid Euphrates all the way to the southern suburbs of Damascus and beyond to the Lebanese border.

[00:07:55] There is we haven't stopped the Iranians from entrenching themselves in Syria.

[00:08:02] We make it much more difficult for them.

[00:08:04] They are going slower than they have planned, but they are still on it.

Mike Doran:

[00:08:11] Zohar, let's let's turn to you now.

[00:08:13] And you you have been cast here.

[00:08:15] I don't know if this is the role you want to play, but you've been cast here as the representative of the defense establishment against this this criticism coming from from Ehud.

[00:08:28] You can you can play that role.

[00:08:30] You know, however, however you would like to.

[00:08:33] But let's let's get your view.

[00:08:34] What is your take on this question?

Zohar Palti:

[00:08:36] First of all.

[00:08:37] Michael, thank you so much for inviting us.

[00:08:39] And with although we'll never use the term against because I'm not against we are you know, we are partner for so

many decades and we have a great respect for everything that he is writing.

[00:08:54] And mainly when he criticizes us as intelligence officer or as a the defense establishment.

[00:09:02] But I will try to shed a light about what used to be in real time our calculation.

[00:09:11] And I can fill out to be rest assured that the voices that he just back then used to said that we have an opportunity and things like that came to the high level of decision makers in Israel.

[00:09:25] And we had a lot of discussions and debates regarding this issue.

[00:09:28] What is the right way to do?

[00:09:30] So it wasn't like something that we missed.

[00:09:34] We saw it.

[00:09:35] There was other opinion back then on Real Time and we try to share the light.

[00:09:39] What was in our calculation?

[00:09:42] The Arab Spring is emerging from today to tomorrow, like all the Middle East.

[00:09:48] Tunis, Libya, Yemen.

[00:09:51] But basically over here, it's touching most of the sensitive issue that Israel in our national defense, we have three issues there, a special relationship with Americans.

[00:10:03] The peace with you and peace with Jordan.

[00:10:06] What happened over here that Egypt completely failed to the Muslim Brotherhood first priority that we have as security services.

[00:10:16] And back then, I'm the chief of intelligence of the Mossad.

[00:10:21] Is to see the stability in Egypt.

[00:10:22] We have Muslim Brotherhood president right now.

[00:10:25] Mubarak is no longer there.

[00:10:26] So we don't know what will be.

[00:10:28] Whether there will be peace, whether something else, whether the Egyptian will change.

[00:10:33] The second issue, of course.

[00:10:36] Used to see the stability of Jordan.

[00:10:37] And because Jordan and Syria are neighbors and because of their refugees and because everything.

[00:10:44] First and foremost, we think whether it's good to the kingdom or not as Israelis.

[00:10:49] And first priority, as I said, is to be coordinated with the US.

[00:10:53] Now, the US back then in 2011 and 12, deeply in Afghanistan, deeply in Iraq, dozens of terrorist attacks against the coalition forces in Iraq.

[00:11:05] Challenges in Syria those years 2012 2013.

[00:11:10] Daesh started to take.

[00:11:12] It came to a point that 70% of Syria is under Daesh.

[00:11:16] And believe me, we know the Syrians.

[00:11:18] We have a long history with Bashar.

[00:11:20] We remember that in 2002 when he came after his dead, he was the first one to decide to launch all the campaign to give weapons system directly to Hezbollah.

[00:11:29] What is dead never done.

[00:11:31] The 202mm that used to launch against us in second Lebanon War and the 302 against Haifa gave the Syrian Bashar gave it to Hezbollah directly.

[00:11:45] We knew it in 2007.

[00:11:47] We know exactly what Bashar have done with the pathogenic nuclear reactor.

[00:11:51] When the Mossad found out that he is building this nuclear.

[00:11:54] And later on in September 5th, we destroyed this issue.

[00:11:58] We remembered everything, but remembered also that Bashar have a huge array of surface to surface missiles, Scud missiles that he used to have back then, not like now.

[00:12:08] And later on, when the American cut the deal with the Russian regarding the chemical weapon that used to have a lot of chemical weapon in Syria.

[00:12:15] And the issue was what the Israeli priority and not mentioning that in 2012 and 2013.

[00:12:23] Take me, for example.

[00:12:24] The most significant issue was the negotiation of the US and the Iranians in Oman, in Muscat, regarding the intermediate agreement that was signed in 2013 before the JCPOA.

[00:12:40] Prime minister's speech in the Congress, all the fact that Israel was against the agreement with the Iranian back then because of the.

[00:12:49] Um, advanced centrifuges.

[00:12:50] And because of the sunset, we used to have so many balls in the air.

[00:12:55] And right now we have to take a decision whether we have a strategic opportunity over here like claimed in his article or not.

[00:13:04] And I'm telling you, frankly, at the same times when it used to be those those debates, we used to have a problem with Gaza.

[00:13:13] We used to have two operations in Gaza in 2012 and 2014.

[00:13:16] Huge one.

[00:13:18] Now, right now to flame another scene where we have so many balls in the air when we have to take under consideration what happened with the Americans in Iraq, what happened with Egypt, whether Morsi will take over the military and things like that in Egypt, whether Jordan, all the refugee Jordan used to get between back then between 700 to 1 million refugees in a couple of months.

[00:13:47] And you know, you're sitting during the night and you speak with all our counterparts.

[00:13:51] I'm not sure that the next thing that we need to do is to get rid as a democratic country from an Arab leader.

[00:13:59] For the first time in our history, we never done it before.

[00:14:02] Now, let's say that everything is quiet.

[00:14:05] You can consider something like that.

[00:14:07] But when you have so many balls in the air and I think that we didn't miss this opportunity now.

[00:14:15] I want to elaborate about some other issue that we have over here.

[00:14:21] First of all, it's the opposition.

[00:14:23] Believe me that the Mossad know the positions we used to call them the Cafe au Lait opposition.

[00:14:28] Why Cafe au lait Because the it only in Paris or in Brussels or in other places, they didn't have a significant foothold in Syria.

[00:14:36] You can ask today whoever is leading the White House right now, Brett McGurk, to choose to deal with that.

[00:14:41] Jim Jeffrey and all the other ones.

[00:14:43] We all used to know exactly where the figures. With the Kurds, no doubt it used to be an opportunity.

[00:14:50] But when the Kurds in Iraq are not speaking among themselves the two parts and when they are not speaking with the Syrian courts and with the Turks that are taking right now a friend and try to cut all this issue meaning on on on the sheet, on the meaning.

[00:15:08] When you look about the data, it's look like you have an opportunity.

[00:15:11] But when you're trying, whether it's tangible and it's real, it wasn't so real.

[00:15:17] Eventually the Israeli like always have to do it alone without any support.

[00:15:22] And because we are not supposed to be the cop of the Middle East when it's coming to our vital interest, no doubt.

[00:15:30] And our vital interest in Syria was to block the Iranian in order to build a third surface to surface against Israel.

[00:15:39] The first one is Lebanon, with more than 100 rockets.

[00:15:43] The second one in Gaza and decade after it right now in 2023.

[00:15:48] I can say that from a strategic point of view with a lot of tactical move that we have done in the last decade.

[00:15:54] Syria right now is not a base of the Iranian.

[00:15:58] Whether Ehud is right that maybe one day it will become the answer is yes.

[00:16:02] But still, we have capability.

[00:16:03] We have the idea, we have the Air Force, We have intelligence.

[00:16:06] It seems to me that for the time being, we are doing okay.

Mike Doran:

[00:16:10] Uh, okay.

[00:16:11] Um, Ehud, I'll give you a chance to, to respond to.

[00:16:15] To Zohar.

[00:16:16] And then and then I have another follow up question for the two of you.

Ehud Yaari:

[00:16:20] I have a huge respect for Zohar and for what he has just said.

[00:16:26] Everything is true.

[00:16:27] My problem was, is that Israel did not identify what the priority was.

[00:16:36] The priority was Assad because Assad represents the first ever.

[00:16:44] Comprehensive plan.

[00:16:48] To try and destroy the state of Israel.

[00:16:52] You know, Mike, No Arab leader, no Nasser, not Assad, the father.

[00:16:58] None of them ever came up with a plan, with a strategy.

[00:17:03] How do you try to extinguish the state of Israel?

[00:17:08] Qasem Soleimani did.

[00:17:11] And he, uh.

[00:17:13] He had a rule.

Mike Doran:

[00:17:14] Sorry.

[00:17:15] Just for the benefit of our viewers, Qasem Suleimani, the former head of the Quds Force, whom the Trump administration killed, uh, in in Iraq in a drone attack.

[00:17:29] The second most powerful guy in in Iran and the architect of Iran's disruptive military strategy of building all of the building, all of the militias around the Arab world.

Ehud Yaari:

[00:17:41] An evil genius.

[00:17:42] And he was the first to come with this idea of a ring of fire.

[00:17:50] Encircle Israel with.

[00:17:55] Many tens of thousands of missiles.

[00:17:59] In order to create a real existential threat to the state of Israel.

[00:18:06] He needed Syria.

[00:18:07] He needed Syria also for the link to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

[00:18:13] And I think this is not our discussion now.

[00:18:16] Their next target, the Iranians, is trying to undermine Jordan with its long border in Israel with Israel and fragile situation.

[00:18:26] What my answer is that we we were not identifying properly our main priority.

[00:18:36] Our main priority was get rid of Assad.

[00:18:40] You could do that.

[00:18:42] You could do that fairly fast.

[00:18:45] It wouldn't have any reverberations around because everybody else, Turkey, Saudis, UAE, Qatar, everybody wanted him out.

[00:18:55] The Russians were not not yet there.

[00:18:59] And you could do it.

[00:19:02] You could do it.

[00:19:03] There was this reluctance, which is very typical.

[00:19:08] I find a of our current and then prime minister and our general staff generally.

[00:19:19] Uh.

[00:19:21] The reluctance to take action if it's not absolutely necessary.

Mike Doran:

[00:19:29] I think in my conversations with Israelis back in those days, I'm talking, you know, 2012 to 2016.

[00:19:39] Um, I think, uh, Zohar, I'm going to ask you to respond to, but I'm just going to add a, a an extra edge to what Ehud just said.

[00:19:53] My sense was that

[00:19:56] There was a what I thought was an exaggerated fear of a muslim brother encirclement of of Israel.

[00:20:05] There was fear of Turkey.

[00:20:07] There was fear of the jihadis in in in Syria.

[00:20:12] You had Morsi in in in in Egypt.

[00:20:17] And I felt I personally have always been focused like a laser on the Iranian question.

[00:20:24] And and I felt at that time that the that the focus on the Iranians got blurred by the by the Israelis.

[00:20:34] So I wonder if you could just respond to that.

[00:20:36] Zohar.

Zohar Palti:

[00:20:39] You are right about the second.

[00:20:40] The first You have two parts in this equation.

[00:20:44] The first one regarding the Muslim Brotherhood phenomena in the region, in Syria with Daesh, in the with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and in other places, and of course, Gaza.

[00:20:55] You are so right.

[00:20:56] You are less right regarding about the focus about Iran back then in 2012, we have been in the middle of considering whether to strike in Iran or not.

[00:21:05] It was all over the newspaper back then.

[00:21:08] And, you know.

Mike Doran:

[00:21:09] So sorry.

[00:21:10] I meant about the Iranian regional the Iranian regional position, not the nuclear position.

Zohar Palti:

[00:21:17] About the Iranian regional one.

[00:21:19] It wasn't on the focus because the Iranian back then it was if I'm trying right now, top of my head to try to see it was before the Houthis, before the Iranians had the foothold in in Yemen.

[00:21:34] It was back then.

[00:21:37] We used to do a lot of activities how to do counter-terrorism around the world.

[00:21:41] After 2008, when Marina was vanished and Kassim Suleiman was all over in Iraq trying to kill Americans and coalition forces, that was the main focus.

[00:21:55] So Israel, because the Americans have been in Iraq, we didn't deal with Iraq.

[00:21:59] It was like the coalition territory that they used to take care about this issue.

[00:22:04] That's the reason that there was a coordination since then, till today regarding Syria, that we took responsibility regarding Syria and all the coordination with with the coalition forces.

[00:22:15] But can say something like that back then.

[00:22:18] It seems to me that over here I have to give compliment to our leadership.

[00:22:21] The Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense back then used to be very responsible and they've done a lot of calculations regarding what it will be the best to Israel and a lot of European countries.

[00:22:35] Unbelievable to say, but the European countries and Arab countries used to come to us to try to do exactly what you'd ask said right now that we haven't done.

[00:22:44] And because of the priority and because we didn't know to anticipate what will happen if there is not going to be an address in Syria and would refer to that in his article as well.

[00:22:57] And this is something Israel always preferred to see an address, bad guys, but an address with the friction in Syria with 70% of Syria was under the occupation or territory of Daesh with all the chemical weapon and Scud missiles.

[00:23:16] Let's say that Bashar is not there.

[00:23:18] Who will control all the chemical weapon?

[00:23:21] Who will do it?

[00:23:24] So we didn't want to take any more chances.

[00:23:28] And to play with the future like we are shaping the future as Israelis.

[00:23:33] Regarding states, it's not true.

[00:23:36] We have our own problems.

[00:23:38] We have our own difficulties.

[00:23:40] So many, as I said before, challenges.

[00:23:42] It seems to me it was back then responsible for that time whether we miss the opportunity.

[00:23:49] Always there is a door that is shutting down and a window that is open.

[00:23:53] And, you know, Israel have amazing capabilities, operational one intelligence, we have outstanding one.

[00:24:01] And if somebody would jeopardize, we know how to deal with it for the time being, it seems to me it's manageable.

Mike Doran:

[00:24:08] Let me let me shift the focus of the discussion a little bit, gentlemen.

[00:24:14] Ehud's article stressed the importance or the or the missed opportunity of toppling Assad.

[00:24:23] But let's let's talk about other possibilities.

[00:24:26] And for me, I think the comparison with the Turks is interesting.

[00:24:31] If 3 or 4 years ago, five years ago, you asked me who was going to come out better at the end of the Syrian civil war with respect to influencing the shape of Syria, who's going to come out better?

[00:24:45] Israel or Turkey?

[00:24:47] I would have said Israel.

[00:24:48] Now, I think I would probably say Turkey.

[00:24:51] The Turks made a number of a number of limited incursions into Syria, which had prevented the creation of a of a PKK statelet on their border, which is their number one priority.

[00:25:05] But it is also given them a foothold inside Syria so that nobody can think about moving forward with a new Syria without consulting them.

[00:25:16] It seems to me that the that Ehud is right.

[00:25:19] Zohar that that that Israel's ability to shape the new Syria is more limited.

[00:25:27] So my question for the two of you is, was there another strategy, say, of building a little corridor, a little cordon in the in the south, say, you know, up to Daraa or something, with Israeli backing where Israel would still have a hand inside Syria in a on the ground?

[00:25:52] I know that this has kind of been a red line.

[00:25:54] Ehud mentioned it after the experience in Lebanon.

[00:25:58] The Israeli experience in Lebanon and in the in the in the in the 80s and 90s.

[00:26:03] And I know Zohar, I read an interview with you in Haaretz a few months back where you said that that's been a searing experience for you.

[00:26:12] The occupation in Lebanon and the desire to and the failure of Israeli governments to to end it.

[00:26:21] But was there another way maybe maybe I'm wrong about putting troops in, but was there another policy that could have given Israel more leverage over Syria, specifically with the issue of breaking the corridor that Iran is building from from Tehran to to Beirut?

[00:26:39] And let's start with you, Ehud.

Ehud Yaari

[00:26:41] I'll get your reaction and I'll go to we'll go to Zohar.

[00:26:43] As an anecdote.

[00:26:45] Years ago, I wrote, I think it was Foreign Affairs.

[00:26:50] I wrote about the Iranian plan to establish land corridors from the territory through Iraq, through Syria to Lebanon, to the Golan Heights border.

[00:27:04] And I came back to Israel and I met the then head of military intelligence later to become a chief of staff.

[00:27:13] And he said to me, You live on a cloud.

[00:27:19] The a true

[00:27:20] Story. AMERICAN CENTER FOR LEVANT STUDIES

[00:27:26] As I said before, there was.

[00:27:29] Really concentration on Daesh and ISIS, and they had all those maps of the stains of the Daesh territory around the Syrian and Iraqi deserts and muscles.

[00:27:44] Et cetera.

[00:27:45] Less concentration at on what the Iranians might do.

[00:27:51] Now as to the south.

[00:27:54] I.

[00:27:54] I have to confess that I'm in constant contact with people in the three governorates of the of South Syria.

[00:28:05] My conclusion.

[00:28:08] Maybe my friend Zohar doesn't agree.

[00:28:11] My conclusion was that with more investment of money.

[00:28:18] Yes.

[00:28:19] Plain and simple.

[00:28:21] Money.

[00:28:24] We could have a different situation now in in the governorates of Quneitra, Daraa and the the Sweida, the Druze.

[00:28:34] We could have.

[00:28:36] A But there was no concentration.

[00:28:41] There was no determination.

[00:28:45] Let's try the change of the political configuration across the border.

[00:28:54] So today, the Syrian army.

[00:28:59] We are five years after they have reoccupied the south, attacked with artillery and tank fire.

[00:29:09] A village Tafas, a village close to Daraa.

[00:29:12] It's still restive.

[00:29:15] They keep killing Syrian officers and roadblocks, etcetera.

[00:29:19] Every time they can, the source could have been in a different shape.

[00:29:25] And especially the link to the Druze mountain.

[00:29:31] Not.

[00:29:32] Not easy.

[00:29:33] It's 100km away from our border.

[00:29:38] They were on the verge of willing to join the uprising or go on their own uprising.

[00:29:49] The difference was I'm I know it's very crude, but it's true.

[00:29:54] The difference was money.

[00:29:57] Mm.

[00:29:58] Zohar.

Zohar Palti:

[00:29:59] So and again, first of all, as you know, there is outstanding connection between some of the community of Dara, between them and Jordan.

[00:30:11] Then most of the refugees that came from the north, from the east and the north came to this part.

[00:30:17] A lot of them used to be Danish.

[00:30:22] The Americans owed a lot of money regarding this issue.

[00:30:29] And wish that there will be Americans over here in this room that we can shed a light about this issue.

[00:30:35] We also.

[00:30:37] Investing it with very, very little success.

[00:30:43] You know them better than me.

[00:30:45] You spoke with them more time than me.

[00:30:48] They are complicated.

[00:30:50] There is friction over there.

[00:30:51] Some of the mullahs between themselves are not getting along.

[00:30:56] A lot of influence from the outside.

[00:30:59] What is important there is that not ideology and not patriotism is the quote of the dollar.

[00:31:06] The power of the dollar.

[00:31:07] Whoever is giving you some more bucks, they are working with him to build a strategy about something like that.

[00:31:16] It would be stupidity from us to go for the mistake that we've done in 81 and 82, in Lebanon, in Gaza, in the West Bank, where right now on the verge that we will have to deal with leadership also in the West Bank.

[00:31:29] Guys, we are not the cop of the Middle East. **DIES**

[00:31:32] The fact that we have opportunity, no doubt the issue, the question from a strategic point of view with Israel have to be the one that are trying right now to orchestrate everything.

[00:31:43] I think based on our history in the last 40 years, we try to do it several of times.

[00:31:48] We have to be a bit modest and to understand that if you have two superpowers right now in Syria like the Americans and the Russians.

[00:31:56] And the Turks, as we said before, and the Iranians, as we said before.

[00:32:00] And Israel is also a very strong power in the Middle East.

- [00:32:04] I'm not sure that Syria is the first priority.
- [00:32:06] Now let's go for the legacy of the American in Syria.
- [00:32:09] Syria, The Americans, frankly.
- [00:32:12] They don't know the spot.
- [00:32:14] So we don't have not energy.
- [00:32:16] Not oil, not other resources series.
- [00:32:19] Syria is Boring.
- [00:32:20] The Americans never dealt with Syria.
- [00:32:22] The only thing that the American dealt with Syria is where the Israeli prime minister came to them and said, Let's speak about the Golan Heights.
- [00:32:28] I'm speaking like 30 years ago or something like that.
- [00:32:30] Right now, the American are doing the last decade something outstanding by keeping their forces in.
- [00:32:37] And he's against all the strategy of the Americans ever.
- [00:32:40] And they're doing a great job by holding this post and east and north east of Syria.
- [00:32:46] The Americans there and protecting the border with Iraq.
- [00:32:49] And if we are speaking about the land on the land passage that you spoke about with Aviva and all the other ones, relatively not that I'm saying it's perfect.
- [00:32:59] Not that I'm saying the arms and flow, it's not flowing from time to time, but relatively based on what Qassem Soleimani idea was, there are still far from it.
- [00:33:09] And this is something that we have to give a lot of credit to.
- [00:33:13] The war between the words that created in Israel like 7 or 8 years ago during the Gadi Eisenkot, then Aviv Kohavi, and right now with Terzi.
- [00:33:21] And it seems to me that the IDF, with support of good guys in the Internet community and with friends, they're handling quite okay.
- Mike Doran:
- [00:33:30] Just one clarification.
- [00:33:32] Zohar, what you said, you mentioned the American position in the ton of the is on the Iraqi Jordanian.

[00:33:41] It's in Syria where Iraq and Jordan come together.

[00:33:45] And I suppose that from the Israeli point of view, the the benefit of the American position there is that it blocks one of the land corridors from from Baghdad to Beirut, and also possibly useful for interdiction of things from the air, although I'm not sure have I got it right or is there something I'm missing there?

Zohar Palti:

[00:34:10] Bingo.

[00:34:11] You phrase it perfectly.

Mike Doran:

[00:34:13] Okay.

[00:34:13] Thank you.

[00:34:14] Uh, Zohar, you raised an issue that is of primary concern to me, so that when I read Ehud's article, I read it from the American perspective.

[00:34:31] You know, it's not my job as an American to tell the Israelis how to deploy their forces.

[00:34:40] But I believe that Syria is an American strategic failure, first and foremost, because all of the things that all of the interests, all of the things that have not happened in, uh, in Syria that trouble.

[00:34:57] Ehud mean, all of the things that have happened, the building of the land, bridges by the, by the Iranians, the entrenched Iranian position there and so on.

[00:35:06] These are preventing them is in my view, a very strong American interest as well.

[00:35:13] And the Americans have simply been absent from this in the best possible interpretation.

[00:35:19] They've been absent from this effort almost, almost entirely or largely, largely absent.

[00:35:27] I would go even further.

[00:35:28] I don't want to push all of my theories on the on the world here, but I would go further and say that that there has actually been some connivance on the part of the Americans to to help the Iranians and the Russians at certain points along the way, help them say make sure make sure that nobody got in their way, give them a free hand, Um, and that sort of thing, especially when the Obama administration was first trying to get the JCPoA.

[00:35:57] But my question for you is twofold.

[00:36:02] Number one, Zohar, you mentioned that the American position was always on one of the three primary issues.

[00:36:10] That was on your minds when you were making decisions about Syria.

[00:36:14] So I wonder if you could tell us how you read it at the time.

[00:36:20] And my and my second question is I'll get to you after I hear your response.

[00:36:27] But I want to say.

[00:36:29] What does Israel do?

[00:36:31] What does Israel do when it has an American regional policy that at best is indifferent to the rise of Iran?

[00:36:39] What should it do?

[00:36:40] Should it have it?

[00:36:41] Should it have a strategy to influence the Americans differently?

[00:36:46] Or Does Israel just have to treat this like the weather, or something?

[00:36:49] It has to it has to work with and can't work against?

Zohar Palti:

[00:36:52] First of all, regarding the Americans from 48 till today, Israel never asked the Americans to from the American to do the job for us.

[00:37:01] Who within the cockpit, who is in the tanks with the our special forces is our boys and our daughters.

[00:37:09] And it's so important for us not ever to risk American lives.

[00:37:14] Just to be clearer regarding this issue, When we're doing intelligence, we're gathering intelligence, we're sharing with the Americans like it's our own boys and girls.

[00:37:27] And when it's coming to Syria and we see that the Americans deployed in TANF or in out of Syria, we have to coordinate with our allies.

[00:37:37] We have to coordinate with our friends because we can't do something in order that after five minutes, the Iranian militia, Iraqi militia, Daesh, whoever, all the bad guys that are in this

neighborhood because we are doing something, will jeopardize American life.

[00:37:53] It's not working like that.

[00:37:55] It's action.

[00:37:57] Before we are planning something, we have to protect our people, our family, no doubt.

[00:38:02] But at the same time.

[00:38:03] So think about the American interest.

[00:38:05] Now, sometime there is a conflict over here and we have to find ways how to breach.

[00:38:11] Now the Americans have another something that we cherish a lot.

[00:38:15] The American always respect the fact that we have the ability to take decision and to act, whether it's in our interest to protect our families.

[00:38:25] And eventually we are finding a way how to work and to cooperate together operationally or Intel from intelligence point of view, operationally, one and not let's say that nine out of ten, we know how to solve it.

[00:38:38] And if 1 or 2 cases out of ten, sometimes we have a debate, we can live with this issue.

[00:38:44] So this is very important to clarify because the fact that the American over here in the region, we remember that we are not alone over here.

[00:38:53] The other issue and spoke about it before is Jordan.

[00:38:57] The Americans have a lot a lot of interests in Jordan and in Iraq, both in Turkey as well as NATO member.

[00:39:04] You have to understand that the American calculation over here sometimes we have to understand, is Israelis.

[00:39:09] Sometimes they look about Jordan, Iraq and Turkey from a different angle, from the Potomac.

[00:39:14] Call it not from Tel Aviv, whether it's always 100% similar to what I think.

[00:39:21] No, but the American respect that sometimes for us it's crucial to operate regarding to block the Iranian convoys or something like that.

[00:39:29] And they are finding a way.

[00:39:30] And right now, when Israel is part of CentCom, it's much easier to do it because CentCom is, as you know, controlling the whole region over here from American Possible.

[00:39:39] So the bottom line over here, whether we are on the same page always the answer is no.

[00:39:45] We have our interests and American have our interest.

[00:39:47] But whether we know how to bridge between those issues, the answer is 100% yes.

Mike Doran:

[00:39:53] Ehud, do you have a response to that?

Ehud Yaari:

[00:39:55] Well, I think that President Obama's policy on Syria is a different opera.

[00:40:04] He said he saw that it was a quagmire, let the Russians drone in it, etcetera.

[00:40:13] But I believe that

[00:40:17] Jim Jeffrey.

[00:40:20] And now Brett McGurk are pursuing a policy or at least a leading a policy.

[00:40:28] Which is based on keeping minimal American force in Syria.

[00:40:35] A in a very effective way.

[00:40:38] Letting the Turks.

[00:40:41] The Kurds and the Israelis take care of the rest, prevent Assad and his allies, Iran and Russia, from achieving a complete victory.

[00:40:57] In my opinion, that's a sensible policy.

[00:41:01] And in a way, as an Israeli, I sometimes think about it that we are in Syria in a way subcontractors.

[00:41:20] And I do believe that if the US maintains presence this current minimal presence in in in Syria.

[00:41:30] And doesn't allow the pro-Iranian militias from driving it out of Syria and of course, Iraq.

[00:41:43] This policy can stabilize.

[00:41:47] Quote unquote, the situation for quite some time.

[00:41:52] At the end.

[00:41:54] My belief is my conviction is we will see a bigger clash with the Iranians over Syrian territory.

Mike Doran:

[00:42:03] Okay.

[00:42:04] So now we have a significant difference of opinion between you guys and me, which is good.

[00:42:10] It's good for the good for the viewers to hear a disagreement.

[00:42:15] I have a I have a significant criticism of the current US policy and in particular, it's Brett McGurk's baby, and that is the establishment of the relationship with the YPG, SDF, which is the PKK, the Syrian wing of the PKK.

[00:42:37] And my problem with that is that it alienates our number one ally in that part of the world, which is Turkey.

[00:42:45] So I have two questions for you.

[00:42:49] Well, let's just I'll just make it one question for you.

[00:42:52] Is there any possibility?

[00:42:55] At all in the new circumstances now of Israel and Turkey finding some common interests and cooperating to achieve them in Syria with respect to Iran.

[00:43:12] I'm seeing a rise in tension between Iran and Turkey across the region.

[00:43:18] It seems to me this is an opportunity that should be explored.

[00:43:23] What do you guys think?

[00:43:24] Let me start with you, Ehud.

Ehud Yaari:

[00:43:27] Well, I agree with you completely that one of the missed trends in the Middle East missed, I mean, by the media.

[00:43:36] Uh, American, Israeli, even Arab media is the rising.

[00:43:46] Competition rivalry between the Turks and the Iranians, which manifests itself by now in in shooting incidents and rocket attacks both in Iraq and Syria.

[00:44:02] The other day, the one Iranian proxy militia sent a drone to a Turkish base in Duhok in near Zakho in in Iraq.

[00:44:18] I think it's on the rise.

[00:44:20] And I think the Turks are aware of it.

[00:44:24] Certainly they are.

[00:44:26] I fail to see the kind of cooperation we can have with the Turks, with their enclaves up north and what we are doing or actually not doing in the south.

[00:44:41] But.

[00:44:44] There is a possibility of, for example, using or employing Israel's traditional historical relationship with the Kurds.

[00:44:58] Including those in Syria.

[00:45:02] And to try and help bridge the tensions between Ankara and Qamishli.

Mike Doran:

[00:45:17] Zohar.

Zohar Palti:

[00:45:19] So in general, I agree with both of you.

[00:45:23] Um, and weather for your question whether it's option that Israel and Turkey will cooperate.

[00:45:30] Turkey used to be a very significant friends and ally of Israel till, let's say like 12 years ago, 13 years ago.

Mike Doran:

[00:45:39] 2010 with the Mavi Marmara.

Zohar Palti:

[00:45:42] After it because somebody changed policy.

[00:45:46] Now Turkey because they have one leg in Europe and one leg in Asia, could be the bridge on the Bosphorus.

[00:45:52] But they decided not to do it for a long time.

[00:45:57] Whether President Erdogan have the leadership and you have the ability to take decision to change it and to be the bridge on the Bosphorus between Europe and the east, between Israel and the other ones?

[00:46:08] The answer is definitely yes.

[00:46:09] Whether we choose to do it, I don't know.

[00:46:13] The other issue is the complex relationship that the Turks have with NATO and with the Americans.

[00:46:21] From the JSF program.

[00:46:24] Till Finland and Sweden.

[00:46:27] Guys.

[00:46:28] There is some issues over here.

[00:46:29] And it's not only just because of the Americans or the Israelis.

[00:46:33] So it's okay that we always criticize ourself.

[00:46:37] But there is another very significant player in this triangle that is calling the shot over here.

[00:46:43] And he decided to spur it.

[00:46:44] 400 Turks

[00:46:46] Not Americans and not Israelis.

[00:46:49] Whether we can finish this issue in a minute.

[00:46:52] The answer is yes.

[00:46:53] And whether Turkey should could be a very positive partner to cooperate regarding Syria, regarding counterterrorism, regarding so many other issues.

[00:47:03] The answer is definitely yes.

[00:47:05] But let's ask the guy that ran Turkey right now whether he wants to change course over here or not.

[00:47:09] I don't have a good answer for that.

Mike Doran:

[00:47:12] Okay.

[00:47:13] Well, go ahead.

Ehud Yaari:

[00:47:15] Yes, please.

[00:47:16] One quick comment.

[00:47:18] Yes, Erdogan is extremely interested in having a pipeline to carry the Israeli gas to Europe via through Turkey.

[00:47:29] Uh, it's complicated.

[00:47:31] I'm not going into the details, but.

[00:47:34] If it's true what some of the geologists predict.

[00:47:40] That there are, let's say, two more Leviathan fields in the Israeli exclusive economic zone.

[00:47:49] It will make the turkey root for Israeli guards the only real option.

[00:47:58] And that would change a lot.

[00:48:00] But it's not going to happen next year.

Mike Doran:

[00:48:03] Thank you.

[00:48:03] Okay.

[00:48:04] Ehud, you and I are singing from the same sheet of music.

[00:48:08] It's beautiful.

[00:48:09] I'm going to have to have some follow up conversations with you so we can make an alliance.

[00:48:14] But before we close here, let me just we just had we're taping this on Thursday, the 6th of July, and it'll go out tomorrow on the seventh.

[00:48:25] We just had a major operation by the Israelis in in Jenin.

[00:48:32] The the Israelis explained that that there's a growing vacuum in the northern West Bank, which is being filled by the Iranians.

[00:48:42] This is, of course, one of the one of the issues, Ehud, that you flagged in your article, a concern that the Iranians are using their growing position in the eastern Mediterranean in order to in order to encircle Israel.

[00:48:57] Can you just just the two of you, can you as your final remarks.

[00:49:03] Can you tie some of the discussion we've had here to the to the Jenin operation?

[00:49:09] Was it a success?

[00:49:11] Are we going to look?

[00:49:12] Are we going to see more like this in the coming year?

[00:49:15] And what does it mean for relations between Israel and Iran?

[00:49:18] Start with you, Ehud.

Ehud Yaari:

[00:49:20] Okay.

[00:49:21] And.

[00:49:23] I think the operation in Jenin has succeeded in dismantling a lot of the terrorist infrastructure installed there.

[00:49:33] It didn't solve the problem.

[00:49:35] It will have to continue, especially when the security organs do not even venture into into Jenin.

[00:49:44] I believe there is no there is an Iranian Syrian against Assad attempt to smuggle together with the Captagon drugs weapons through Jordan into the West Bank.

[00:50:01] In its beginning to be significant quantities.

[00:50:07] Standard weapons.

[00:50:08] Not improvised.

[00:50:11] And to reach that generation of under 27 year old guys who cannot get a work permit in Israel.

[00:50:21] The Palestinian economy does not offer afford them any opportunities and therefore they are forming all these of ad hoc militant groups and going on.

[00:50:36] And I would say that

[00:50:40] My main theme would be that we have to act today.

[00:50:45] Everybody, not just us, the donor states, us included.

[00:50:50] We have to act today as if the morning after Abbas is gone.

[00:50:57] He's 87.

[00:50:58] His father lived to 105, but he doesn't have a guarantee.

[00:51:03] The morning after Abbas is now.

[00:51:05] Now is the time for combined effort to compel him.

[00:51:12] To appoint a can do government.

[00:51:15] Which will look after the population, establish social services, build an economy and reform their limping security organizations.

[00:51:28] Otherwise, my expectation is that we will see a third intifada, but the third Intifada will be directed against the PA and Fatah.

[00:51:40] And and backed by backed by Iran or just based on on local grievances.

[00:51:47] The Iranians are providing the funding.

[00:51:49] The Iranians provide the funds and in cases the knowhow how to assemble improvised rockets and things like that.

[00:52:00] Uh, but so far I feel there is some exaggeration of of their actual presence in this scene.

Mike Doran:

[00:52:11] Interesting.

[00:52:12] Uh, Zohar, you get the last word here.

[00:52:15] Ehud got the first.

[00:52:16] You get the last.

Zohar Palti:

[00:52:18] So the Iranian don't have a foothold in the West Bank.

[00:52:21] They have influence, as I said, mainly regarding finance and things like that.

[00:52:25] We have outstanding internal service called Shabak that, thank God you know, how to control the bad guys in the West Bank for the time being.

[00:52:35] And I'm going back to our what we spoke before on.

[00:52:40] And I'm sorry.

[00:52:41] Um, I think that would be so right regarding the day after Abu Mazen is already there and why I'm mentioning that one.

[00:52:49] I think you've made an outstanding nomination.

[00:52:53] A couple of weeks ago with the government of the Bank of the Turkish bank when he brought a lady, very serious one.

[00:53:00] It used to, of course, working in the US, probably brilliant one to try to recover the Turkish economy.

[00:53:10] The same the Palestinians have to do.

[00:53:12] There are so many bright and young people around the diaspora, meaning abroad that used to study whether in Princeton, Yale, Harvard, MIT or their own London School of Economics.

[00:53:24] Right now the PA is on the verge of to be an entity of like, nothing.

[00:53:30] The Palestinians think that they are corrupt.

[00:53:32] The Palestinians are not trusting them, and they have and they need completely reforms.

[00:53:39] And as just phrase it better than me, even, we are already there.

[00:53:45] It's not five minutes after we are right now have to deal with it because otherwise we the Israeli will have a huge problem with all the PA over here.

[00:53:55] And this is our basically this is our worst nightmare that we will have to control all the cities of the Palestinians.

[00:54:03] We don't want to do it.

[00:54:06] And this is the last moment that the international community and maybe maybe although I'm not with it, that Abu

Mazen will understand that you have to bring people in order to elevate the situation of the.

Mike Doran:

[00:54:20] Okay, Gentlemen, thank you for what was a very, very interesting, very enlightening conversation.

[00:54:26] It's great to have two people on who know what they're talking about and don't entirely agree, but disagree

[00:54:34] Very respectfully.

[00:54:35] Really appreciate it.

[00:54:36] Thank you very much and have a good day.

