
Interview: Yossi Ben-Ari

Israeli General on Prospects for Peace

Brig. Gen. Yossi Ben-Ari (res.) served in the Israeli Defense Forces as a senior military intelligence officer. He is currently a co-director of the Strategic Affairs Unit of IPCRI (Israel-Palestine Center for Research and Information). He was interviewed on Aug. 22 by Dean Andromidas.

EIR: Knesset Member Yossi Beilin has called for the convening of a Madrid II Middle East peace conference. It is a call that has been endorsed by Lyndon H. LaRouche and his political action committee as the only alternative to a new war in the region. Do you see this as a real option for Israel?

Ben-Ari: Now that the war in Lebanon has come to an end, Israel is in the midst of a confusing time. I believe that the government needs to take the opportunity to discuss what its strategic goals should be now, especially when the convergence plan doesn't seem to be valid any more. Still, Israel is busy now with the outcomes of the war, and most public energy is focussed on what type of investigative commission will check the war and its lessons. For the time being, nobody is looking behind our back to see what is coming up with Iran, which actually is the greatest problem that Israel is confronted with today. So, my opinion is, that if [Prime Minister] Ehud Olmert is looking for a real alternative that will function as a safeguard for him, he should make a new comprehensive political initiative, using the concept of the 1991 Madrid conference that you mentioned. In other words, Israel should try to positively and politically re-engage Syria and Lebanon, in addition to renewal of the talks with the Palestinians.

Olmert will have to be very courageous to take such an initiative at this very sensitive time, when he actually has to take steps to save his position as Prime Minister. Therefore, I am not sure he is in the right internal political position to take such an initiative. I wish he would do so, but today I am less of an optimist. I think he does not feel he would enjoy the support of majority of the people, because my impression is that the public is expressing more right-wing tendencies after the war in Lebanon. I think that if Israel will have new elections tomorrow, Kadima would simply disappear from the political arena and that Bibi Netanyahu, as the leader of the Likud, would enjoy much greater support compared to what he had in the last elections. Although it is too early to judge, I would not be surprised if he would win a future election if public opinion would be as it is today.

So, going to your question and specifically summarizing

this issue, I would say that there might be an opportunity in engaging Syria and the other parties in some kind of political process, but I fear this could not be carried out under the current internal political situation in Israel.

On the other hand, I am not very sure that the Syrians would jump on the negotiation wagon immediately if Israel offers that. In his last address to the Syrian people early this week, [President] Bashar Assad was not that positive towards peace. Then, at least for the time being, we cannot ignore Iran as his best partner today. Still, I believe that if Bashar were offered the Golan Heights, he would take it as the preferred option. I am not very sure he is in the position to deliver the goods that Israel expects from any type of agreement with Syria. So maybe it is all too premature.

EIR: The Madrid I conference was made possible by the Bush I Administration, especially the pressure applied by then-Secretary of State James Baker III.

Ben-Ari: I think you mentioned a very important point. And this is the negative attitude of the current Bush Administration towards bringing Syria back into some kind of political or peace process. The American administration still looks at Syria as a spoiler: They see it continuing to support the Palestinian terror—we know that Islamic Jihad and Hamas headquarters are still in Damascus; and of course, they support Hezbollah with weaponry, either by direct supplies, or indirectly, allowing Iranian ammunition and weaponry to go through Damascus.

Then, the White House is very unhappy with Syria leaving its borders with Iraq open for terrorists and insurgencies, for infiltration into Iraq. Therefore, this administration has made no signs of changing their attitude in a way that can allow Syria to be a partner in a negotiating process.

The big question is how Israel can take an initiative vis-à-vis Syria if there is not support of the American administration. I don't see Olmert taking such an initiative unless he gets the clearance of President Bush.

EIR: What is the alternative? If this war starts again, the future does not look very promising.

Ben-Ari: First of all, I want to say that I am not very sure Hezbollah is going to initiate another struggle or war against Israel tomorrow morning. They need time to recover, as we do, so I don't see an immediate threat coming from the North. At the same time I don't see Syria seeking war, because if they intended to take part in any aggression against Israel, they could have done it through the last war. This was an opportunity, which they preferred not to take.

But the real problem, of course, is Iran. What really worries me personally is that the state of Israel needs to start to prepare itself to engage Iran. It could be seen in the headline of *Yediot Aharonot* this morning. Iran could do it either directly, as [Iranian President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad stated a couple of times lately, or by continuing to use Hezbollah as



Courtesy of General Ben-Ari

Gen. Yossi Ben-Ari: "The big question is how Israel can take an initiative vis-à-vis Syria if there is not support of the American Administration. I don't see Olmert taking such an initiative unless he gets the clearance of President Bush."

a proxy. I would not be surprised if they even will recruit Syria to be a participant in such an offensive effort.

What I think should be a wake-up call for all of us, is the expected negative reaction of Ahmadinejad to the initiative of the United Nations Security Council. Let's make it clear—Iran goes on with its nuclear program for military purposes. I wonder if the Israeli decision-makers have clear-cut answers as to what should be done so that we will not be surprised, and if we are, that we have the proper and adequate answers to this challenge.

My personal judgment is that Israel should jump into a political process in order to cut off Iran from our close surroundings. If there were a chance to bring Bashar [Assad] in, we might be able to create some kind of Sunnite belt around us, consisting of Syria, Lebanon, as well as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Palestinians. All of them are parties that have an interest in avoiding Shi'ite influence within their states, that might threaten their current regimes. So, if we would be able to engage them in a political process and reach political agreements, preferably an overall comprehensive one, it would help insulate us from the Iranian threat.

If I put myself in the shoes of an Israeli decision-maker, the political process, of course, is the preferred option rather than putting yourself in an armed conflict with Iran. But practically speaking, our politicians are probably more busy with the need to give answers to the immediate personal questions they're facing after the last war, than to deal very deeply with the potential strategic threat coming from Iran. The Israeli-Arab conflict requires a political solution. If there is an Israeli basic readiness to go back to the '67 lines with Syria, Lebanon,

and the Palestinians, there might be a better chance to end this conflict.

EIR: Israel Pensioners Minister Rafi Eitan warned that if the U.S. attacks Iran, Israel will be the first to be counter-attacked.

Ben-Ari: I think his evaluation is completely correct. Even if we are not going to be involved in any Western effort against Iran, I believe we will be the first one to have the jihad attacks on our heads. That's for sure. I think this was exactly the case with the first Iraq War in 1991 with Saddam Hussein, when we had 40 Scuds falling in and around Tel Aviv after the coalition forces attacked Iraq. So, it really doesn't matter if Israel would participate in such an effort or not, we will anyway be their victim.

I think we have another option to consider. Israel can ignore the American attitude and seek for a peace process in an effort to create some sort of security belt vis-à-vis the Iranian threat. This is a real issue for consideration. If somebody in our country would consider all options, the major two are either to get into some kind of dispute with the Bush Administration, or to get into great potential

problems with Iran. Maybe a better preference would be to get into some bad times with the White House, and thereby ease the threat from the eastern side. After all, we have had our differences and disputes with previous U.S. administrations, but it didn't affect the overall strategic relations of both sides.

I believe that if Israel would come to the conclusion of approaching Syria, and bring her into some kind of negotiation, it will be the better option for us. Maybe we should do it even though Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld, would be a bit "crazy" about us. So we should not ignore this option.

EIR: In our earlier discussion you said it would be a good idea for a delegation of Israeli policy-makers to go to Washington to convince the Bush Administration and Washington policy-makers that a Madrid II-type approach is what is necessary. David Kimche, in calling for a Madrid II conference, also recommended that the Israelis should work to convince Americans.

Ben-Ari: Well I think this is the right direction. We really need some good people like David Kimche who are very familiar to the public, and know the circles of decision-makers and lobbies in Washington who can do the job. And, of course, it has to be done by people who do not hold official positions, because those figures, even if they understand that this should be done, cannot negate the current Israeli policy. I think there is a lot to be done in this direction. If the Congressional elections in November bring some kind of change, I think it might even give a better perspective and options to really influence the attitudes in Washington and the American public.