

"Winds of Change in the Middle East: An Israeli Perspective"

Speech by  
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GENERAL YADLIN: I am very glad to be here this afternoon to give you some of my thoughts, from an Israeli perspective, about the winds of change in the Middle East.

I never met Zeev Schiff before I became a major general. It was my father who recommended, when I was promoted from the Air Force to the General Staff, that I have a meeting with Zeev. My father, who was—and still is—a very wise man, told me, "Amos, you are moving from a very simple world of the Air Force, dealing with speed, G, bombs, rockets for which you can calculate the effect, to a very complex

role, a role of world of uncertainty, a world of politics, a world of media. And the best instructor for you is Zeev Schiff."

So I met Zeev before every *Aluf* position. *Aluf* is the position of General, and I had three of these positions. And in each one of the meetings, Zeev gave me very wise advice that I carry with me along the way.

I cannot swear that I remember his exact words. But let me speak of the four kinds of advice that was given to me. First, he told me exactly what my father told me: "Amos, it is a comprehensive, complex, unbelievable, uncertain world—unbelievable." This I remember. (Laughter.) "And you should look for all—or for the main—factors that drive the strategic or tactical problem and how to solve them.

"Second, there is always in history something that you can learn from—and history is a very good professor for you. But history will never tell you everything, because the world is so dynamic. And the challenge is to find out what in this specific problem is new—and it may change. It may change where the events are going.

"Number three: Don't panic. Don't panic. Nothing is ever quite bad as the headlines. So look at them and find out whether there is some good news there." And after talking about opportunities, he also said, "Be slightly paranoid, because nothing is ever quite as good as the headlines." (Laughter.)

So addressing you this afternoon, I will try to go with Zeev's wisdom and apply it to what we are now seeing in the Middle East. Is the Arab Spring significant? Here I think we have no hesitation in saying yes. It is the most significant event that the Middle East has gone through since the 1970s. I think if you take a decade that was so important that it influenced the Middle East for forty years, it was the 1970s. The war between Israel and Egypt, the peace between Israel and Egypt, the oil prices that went up dramatically and changed the resources balance in the Middle East as well as on the global scope, and the Iranian revolution—all these events went for forty years. And now we are seeing a new set of events.

Are we really understanding where it is going? And here I am much more modest and humble. I think it is only the beginning. The results of events in the short term can go in another direction in the long or in the medium term. In fact, the jury is still out, even in Tunisia and Egypt.

Take Egypt, for example. We don't know yet what the results of the elections will be. They are months ahead. Basically, Egypt is still ruled by the same strong and very much popular military. And the

underground streams that were before Tahrir Square continue to flow. We don't know exactly where and in which power they are going.

The war in Libya: Some countries are very good at starting wars. They are less good at exit strategies from wars. So the war in Libya can achieve what everybody hopes it will achieve: the change of the Qadhafi regime. But it can be long; it can be a tough civil war. And who knows who are these rebels are...whether they are freedom fighters, as we all want to believe, or al-Qaeda elements that [are] staying behind, the way they did in Afghanistan thirty years ago.

The unrest in Syria: We don't know where it is going yet. President Asad was quite confident in his speech this morning that he has his hands on the stick, flying Syria to the right place. I am not that sure. But the consequences of a change in Syria can go both ways. And I will speak about it later.

I want to point out that the two most important countries in the Middle East still didn't see this Arab Spring affecting them—I point to Saudi Arabia and to Iran. With all due respect to Tunisia or to Yemen or to Bahrain, these two countries, and the consequences of the Arab Spring in these two countries, are much more important.

Is it a domino effect? Not necessarily. I think that the scent of the jasmine from Tunisia is moving east. But of course, in every country it is mixing with the local scent, and the local scent is totally different in each one of the nations and the countries. So we must do a state-by-state analysis. No one state... has the same problem or the same fundamental splits in the society—sectarian, religious, social, poor, or rich.

And the means to cope with the winds of change are different. In some places, you fire the government. In some places, you send the army to the street. And in other places, you pay billions of dollars to the citizens and you keep the winds very, very calm.

So, a state-by-state analysis. There is a struggle over the narrative of this revolution. And those who sit in Tehran or even al-Qaeda would like to see it as an Islamic Revolution, as something that continues the revolution in Iran—they finally were able to export the revolution. And al-Qaeda, of course, will say, "This is a materialization of our goals". There is the Syrian narrative that Mubarak was removed because he had made peace with Israel and supported the continuation of the peace that was made by Sadat.

I think we can say very clearly that these two narratives are not the correct narratives. It is really the narrative of Arab people who care about their own societies and are trying to change them.

Another point I would like to make is that this is a revolution without leaders. A leaderless revolution. Who is the leader of the Egyptians in Tahrir Square? And who is the leader of the people in Bahrain or in Yemen? Nobody can say. We still have to wait for the charismatic figures who will take the revolution where this revolution is going.

A very interesting point ... is that a group of three countries—or two-and-a-half countries—are not participating in this Arab Spring. And I speak about Lebanon, Iraq, and the Palestinians. And when I was wondering why, in Lebanon, in Iraq, and among the Palestinians, they are not going to the street to demonstrate, my answer was, they've already been there.

They've already been there. The Lebanese went out to the street in 2005. The Iraqis, with help from a friend, changed their country. More than demonstrating, they fought each other, they paid a lot, and they don't have any desire to be there again. So the Lebanese, so the Palestinians, who went through two intifadas.

But I also pay attention to the fact that change is usually intention with stability. And these three countries—or two-and-a-half countries—will prefer at this moment stability...among the nations in the Middle East.

I will go to the second point of Zeev. This is how we learn from history and try to reflect it on what is going on today. I think the first lesson from history is that revolutions have the tendency to be hijacked in the second wave.

If you go back to the French Revolution, 1789, if you go to the communist revolution in Russia, 1917, if you go back to 1979, when the Iranian Revolution happened, in the first wave you have very good people with very good intentions to change the regime—the oppressive king, czar, shah, whatever. They go to the street; they change. The ruler is removed.

But then in the second wave—a year later, sometimes less, sometimes more—another oppressive regime takes over and at some point the people miss the previous ruler. So we have to be aware whether a second wave—a kind of counterrevolution, not in the sense of what the communists called people of counterrevolution—but the second wave of revolution is happening.

Another thing that we have to learn from history is, in a way, going to the other way. Think about the European Spring of 1848-1849. Almost all the revolutions failed. Almost all the liberal winds disappeared. But if you look at Europe toward the end of the nineteenth century, as a different kind of building a country—a united Italy, a united Germany—at the end of the nineteenth century, that Spring of nations basically achieved what they failed to achieve at the very beginning of the voyage.

And last from history, a warning. This is the Arab warning. We have to identify what was in the history, what was missing, when we analyze a case from history. And in this case, we may call it, you know, the Facebook revolution. It wasn't that. Not in Europe in 1849, not in Russia in 1917, and not even in Iran in 1979, even though the cassettes of Khomeini were very similar to the Facebook revolution.

But the Facebook revolution is more than that. It's a new world of communication: a very fast communication between people; mass communication through the Internet, through the satellites. And this can mobilize masses to the street or against government much faster than governments can make decisions and send their troops to the street. So this is a new phenomenon that we have to bring into our calculations, even though it is not a silver bullet.

It is not something that you're going to see everywhere, every time. And for every phenomenon, there is somebody who immediately prepares the countermeasure: how to defeat the new measures that have just worked wonderfully in one place and will not work so well in another.

So I move now to the third point of Zeev: Don't panic. I had just returned to Israel from one of my trips, my after-retirement trips, a week after the Egyptians decided to change their president and advise him to move, and Israel was basically stressed. And I saw that everybody in Israel is so worried. So I decided, for the first time, to go on national TV and say that there are some opportunities. Let me speak about four of them.

The first one is that a democratic Middle East is good for Israel. Two democracies rarely go to war. And Israel cannot remain indifferent to the values that brought the Egyptian people to Tahrir Square, advancing the values that we believe in—freedom, justice, rule of law, democracy. Even if in the short term it may be more dangerous—more splits—in the long run I believe it's a very, very positive process that we should support.

The second good news: I think that there is a new understanding, not in Israel, not in the United States, but in the Arab street, that Israel is not the core problem of the Middle East. And this excuse or

argument was used against Israel many times. We cannot do that; we cannot do that because everybody will blame us because Israel is the problem.

The idea is that if we just solve the Israeli-Palestinian issue the rest of the problems in the Middle East will disappear was a false idea. Of course we want to solve the Israeli-Palestinian issue. But this is not the core problem. The core problems are poverty, dictatorship, and other problems that the people in the Arab Street are now interested in, more than in Israel.

The third good news, I think, is the probability of a crack in the radical axis that goes all the way from Tehran, through Damascus to Hizballah in Lebanon and to Hamas in Gaza. The probability that this axis will not work well is going up.

Syria was always the weak point in this axis, because, unlike Iran, Hizballah, and Hamas, Syria is a secular country that is willing to recognize Israel on Israel's terms. The other three members of this axis never spoke about recognizing Israel or doing peace with it. So Syria was the weak point.

There were many who wondered how to shift Syria away from this axis. And the wave of the Arab Spring may change this axis to the good. If the Syrians understand that their country's future lies in political openness and peace, and if there comes a regime that will not support Hizballah and Hamas, I think it's a big opportunity, a great opportunity, for Israel.

Perhaps the greatest opportunity or the most important opportunity—even if the chances of it happening are not that high—is if the Jasmine Revolution spreads to Iran. This is the number-one strategic problem of the Middle East, of Israel, and maybe of the whole global politics. If Iran is going to be sold, to be changed, I think it will be much easier for everybody who should take decisions vis-à-vis Iran in the coming years.

I will move now from opportunities to threats, and I will be slightly paranoid. (Laughter.) The peace between Egypt and Israel was a very important pillar of the Middle East strategic balance. The peace provided for both countries an opportunity to concentrate on their internal problems, on other problems, and saved them a lot of money and blood that was diverted from war to peace, from military to building their economies.

So I think that both countries will make the effort and continue with this peace, even though it may not be the same format of the previous peace. Between zero, which is war, and 100, which is the peace

between the United States and Canada, there are many stations. There are many stations. You are not necessarily moved from peace to war. By the way, we weren't in 100. We were in a very cold peace.

But even a new regime in Egypt will have to build its calculus about the importance of peace with Israel. And they have many stations on the way from peace to war. They can call the ambassador from Tel Aviv. They can even cut the diplomatic relation. They can do many steps on the way, before they will go to war.

So I think we are not going to war. I think the peace will continue. But we have to make sure—and this is the slightly paranoid point—that if we are not assessing the situation well enough, we have to prepare ourselves for a future that will make us look at Egypt in a different perspective.

I'm not calling for a larger military; I don't think this is the time. I am only calling for a better look at what is developing in Egypt. And as I said, it is not yet decided. I'm calling for developing capabilities that in the long run can take a lot of time. And if there is a change, we will be ready. We will be ready.

As chief of intelligence, it was my duty to issue a warning—an early warning—to the chief of staff, defense minister, prime minister, about every front. On the northern front, my contract with my superiors—my political masters—was numbered in days, sometimes in hours, because we have to mobilize the reserve if something is going to happen in the north. So this was an operational early warning. With Egypt, we have peace. No operational early warning. But strategic early warning, which we measure in years, is what we have to discuss right now.

The second place we have to look very, very carefully is Jordan. We do enjoy peace with Jordan—once again, not the 100 percent kind of peace that we want, but one that is quite stable and with a lot of benefits for both sides. Israel's longest border is with Jordan. And I cannot see something that will change the security needs of Israel more than having this long border behave in the way that the Gaza Strip border is behaving. It would be a substantial and important change if Jordan becomes hostile.

We have to be aware of the tendency to export the problem to Israel. This was the way Arab dictators behaved for many, many years. We were very pleased that in Tahrir Square, none—the demonstrators and the military or the leaders—pointed to Israel as the source of the problem. This is not the case with Bashar's piece this morning.

But, once again, words—we get used to words. We have to be aware that exporting the problem will be in a more kinetic kind of export. And Hizballah, Hamas, Syria, and Iran may decide that this is the time to divert attention to Israel.

The last slightly paranoid point is chaos. Chaos is a state in—a couple of states in the Middle East. There is the Pakistani chaos. There used to be an Arafat chaos. And with all our assessment of this kind of regime or another kind of regime, the chaos that was in Iraq 2004-2005 can be a model for Libya, for Yemen, and for other countries.

So, once again, as long as the chaos is in Yemen, from an Israeli perspective, we can live with it. If chaos is in Syria, and the missiles and the chemical weapons have gone to some faction or terrorist, it's become a serious issue that we have to look at.

I want to conclude my briefing about the implications for Israel of what is going on. And this is the time to say that although I am no longer in an official position; I basically conclude five years of looking at our neighbors. Even though the insights that we collected, and the analysis, assumptions, and predictions were the basis for policy, I am not in intelligence now, and not in policy. But I will try to make some points about guidelines that should help Israel to survive in its tough neighborhood.

I think that in this case, unlike many others, I personally recommend a proactive policy: in this case it would not be a mistake to be passively strategizing. No intervention, no interference, keep quiet and let the Arab world deal with its own problems. Israel should not be there. We must be very careful—even more careful than we were in the last five years—in our response to provocation. It would not be wise to play into the hands of those who want to divert the attention from the real problem of the Arab world—the real problems—to Israel.

But there is a line of provocation upon which you have to react. And once again, the kind of reaction should be calculated very carefully according to what's going on around. We must plan for the long term. There must be some shift in resources toward defense. I already said that we are not going back to the time—to the 1970s—when 25 percent of our budget, of our GDP, was devoted to defense, because 25 percent of GDP causes 500 percent inflation. But we have to prepare for the long-term investments that will be needed if the worst-case scenarios develop.

If we reach the negotiating table and we are to discuss security arrangements, the events that we are seeing now should be taken into consideration. A change of regime, a change of political balance, should be a possibility that the future defense arrangement of Israel should be taking into consideration.

In conclusion, there are, sometimes, more questions than answers. I tried to be balanced. We understand that some regimes and rulers are gone. But almost all the problems of the Middle East remain. So we have to cope with them. And once again, from Israel's perspective, Iran is the most important. With all that is happening in Tunisia and Egypt and Syria, Iran continues to be the most important and challenging issue that Israel will have to deal with in these winds of change, and without—if the winds do not change anything. Thank you very much for listening.

(Applause.)