



True North in
Canadian public policy

Straight Talk

January 2019

Straight Talk with Amos Yadlin and Janice Stein

Israel confronts a region mired in conflict and instability – from the Syrian war to the growing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran to Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians closer to home. This edition of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute’s Straight Talk is based on a conversation between University of Toronto professor Janice Stein and General Amos Yadlin (Ret’d), which took place as part of the Nota Bene Dinner Speaker Series on October 11, 2018 in Toronto. MLI is proud to be a partner in this prestigious series.



Major-General Amos Yadlin (Ret’d) served as chief of the Directorate of Military Intelligence before becoming head of Israel’s leading security think tank, the Institute for National Security Studies. He is a decorated fighter pilot, having flown over 250 combat missions, including the 1981 attack on Iraq’s Osirak reactor.



Janice Stein is Belzberg Professor of Conflict Management at the University of Toronto.

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Janice Stein: Amos Yadlin's was born on a kibbutz in Israel. He has flown over 5,000 sorties in his career in the air force, eventually becoming Deputy Commander of the Air Force. He spent a year in Washington as the defence attaché and became one of the top 10 most influential people in the country when he was appointed head of Israel's Military Intelligence Directorate. In that role, you see everything and know everybody.

I cannot help but start tonight with the subject of Saudi Arabia. You know Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), you've met him, you've negotiated with him. Take us behind the scenes, Amos. Help us understand the man. What is he like?

Amos Yadlin: We have to understand that the Crown Prince is a young man of 33. I wasn't even a squadron commander at that age, and he belongs to one of the most conservative, risk-averse countries in the world. Ibn Saud was the founder of the kingdom, had many sons (as daughters are not counted in Saudi Arabia), and before dying said that the crown should go horizontally from brother to brother. That tradition is now broken. Ibn Saud appointed his son as the Minister of Defence and the Crown Prince and removed the more experienced members of the family such as Muhammad bin Nayef. Suddenly, Saudi Arabia became more risk-taking, with one man making all the decisions; a young man with aggressive tendencies. And then what happened? A war in Yemen.

Janice Stein: Which is going badly.

Amos Yadlin: Very badly. You have no idea how much Yemen is suffering. It's a humanitarian crisis where millions are starving, widespread illness is rampant, and in the end the Saudis are not winning. They have the best weapons bought from the US, with the fourth largest defence budget in the world, after the US, China and Russia. Yet they are unable to win this war. There are thousands of rockets flying from Yemen to Saudi Arabia, and ballistic missiles being fired towards Riyadh. And the result is the war is going nowhere. Then the Crown Prince declared a diplomatic war against Qatar, which is accused of being a friend of Iran and of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. Yet Qatar is flourishing with Al Jazeera. He then tried to force Saad Hariri, the Prime Minister of Lebanon, whom he called to Riyadh, to resign.

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Janice Stein: He came back though.

Amos Yadlin: Yes, at least he didn't arrest Hariri. On foreign affairs MBS gets low grades. On domestic issues the Crown Prince understood that if he wants to reform Saudi Arabia, he must take care of a few important subjects. The economy depends completely on oil, and he has a very ambitious 2030 program that will take Saudi Arabia from being an oil-based economy to one that is more diversified. He planned to privatize five percent of Aramco with an IPO (initial public offering), a company estimated to be worth US \$2 trillion. So far the privatization is on hold.

He has allowed women to drive, which is a good thing, but then arrested leaders of the women's rights movement. On Islam he has the right approach. He wants to step back from radical Islam and is moving to an Islam that is modern and moderate. But he's fighting a strong establishment where al-Qaeda was born. When asked

how things will turn out, I say it's difficult to predict whether he'll be a Saudi Ataturk (Ataturk took Islamic Turkey from the 19th century into the modern age), or whether he'll even reach his 35th birthday. I give him a 50/50 chance whether he'll succeed at the former.

Janice Stein: Probably less now.

Amos Yadlin: I'm now less optimistic than I was because he's fighting on too many fronts. He has the right ambitions but being the only one who takes all the decisions is risky. Usually, in that position, when you are going up in the ranks, you learn to listen to smart people. He's not listening enough. The only one he's listening to is his father. His father is not in good health, he's over 80. About two hours a day he's running the business and at that time he is the only one that MBS is listening to.

Janice Stein: You could probably describe Yemen right now as part of the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which is spilling over into all parts of the region. If you look at those two, who has the endurance and the strategic power to prevail?

Amos Yadlin: It's too simplistic to think that in the Middle East it's only Iran and Saudi Arabia. You're right that they are rivals; they hate each other, Farsi and Arab, Shia and Sunni fighting over who will control the oil market, fighting about who will control what in the Persian Gulf (or the Arab Gulf), who is the leading nation of the Islamic world.

It used to be Egypt. Unfortunately, Egypt is in very difficult economic, social and political crises. If you look at the Middle East today and who are the strongest states, not one of them is Arab. It's Turkey, it's Iran and it's Israel.

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Now, I'm coming back to your question – Iran is stronger than Saudi Arabia. A country of eighty million people, one of the three countries that can go back a thousand years, China, Israel and Iran, that's it. And Iran is a proud nation. I studied Iran – six years when I was Chief of Intelligence and seven years now at the leading think tank in Israel – and I never underestimate them. There are more ministers with PhDs from good universities in the UK and America in the Iranian government than in the Israeli government or the American government. These are serious people, smart people.

Unfortunately, they are ruled by clerics, ayatollahs for the last 40 years and the situation in Iran is not good. If you are an average Iranian citizen, you are unhappy with what's going on. Inflation is at 10-15 percent, with the rial losing its value this year, maybe losing more in the future, and there is no mechanism to compensate the poor for higher inflation. Unemployment, especially among the young and well-educated, is very high. Corruption is also a big problem in Iran. The environment is in bad shape – no clean water, the air is polluted, etc. The younger generation wants a change and the revolution hasn't delivered. The problem is that the regime is still very strong and in charge.

We're not good in predicting regime change. All the experts on the Soviet Union in the 1980s didn't see what was coming under Gorbachev. Nobody in Egypt saw Mubarak going away as long as he was alive. When Mubarak was in power, Egypt's Minister of Intelligence – Omar Suleiman – came to visit Israel. We asked him

about regime stability and he said, “General Yadlin, don’t worry. Yes, Mubarak may die, but we know who will replace him – his son Gamal. The people love him, the army are loyal to him, don’t worry.” And three months later Mubarak was removed, his son was imprisoned, and this was the head of intelligence with a quarter of a million informants all over the place, in the military, in the universities, in the markets, in the mosques. It’s very difficult to predict whether the regime in Iran will hold.

However, I have a very simple model that asks certain questions about regime stability. Is the military with the regime? This was not the case for Mubarak, they deserted him. Is there a religious establishment with the regime? Yes, the ayatollahs are still telling the people every time they come to a mosque that this is a good regime. Is the economy good enough? No, in this case it’s not good enough. And are the people losing their fear and willing to go the street and protest? This was the case in Egypt. It is not the case in Iran. They look around and remember the bloodshed after the last revolution 40 years ago; and they have other examples in the neighbourhood: Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen. And they don’t have any desire to start a civil war.

In the privacy of their home it might be a revolution – they drink wine, they speak against the regime. But when they go out to the street, they behave as the regime wants them to behave.

Janice Stein: Israeli intelligence recently released a promotion about a nuclear archive that was found in Tehran. Aren’t you upset when politicians release intelligence information?

Amos Yadlin: Intelligence is not standing for its own sake – you use the intelligence for something. You can use it for a military operation, a diplomatic operation, and so on. The real question is whether by using the intelligence, you are burning your own important sources. There is a famous story about Churchill and Enigma, which basically broke the German encryption. The British got the message that the Germans were going to bomb Coventry and the prediction was that there will be more than 10,000 casualties. They didn’t warn the city in order to keep the intelligence source alive, that’s how important it was.

But in this case, you have to ask whether Prime Minister Netanyahu burned any source in the Israeli intelligence. To my knowledge not so much, because the operation was over anyway; the Iranians knew that the Israelis got into their systems and took basically all the documents, CDs and files on the nuclear program. I don’t think that he sacrificed sources of intelligence.

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Janice Stein: Let me ask you one bigger picture question about Iran before we turn to Israel. You consider Iran the major threat in the region, and I remember that you were alarmed by the nuclear trajectory that Iran was going down, and not an enthusiast for the agreement that had been reached. But a year later, you said the agreement was doing its job and that, relatively speaking, the benefits were greater than the cost. Do you agree with President Trump withdrawing from the agreement and what impact does that have over the next few years on the nuclear program?

Amos Yadlin: Prime Minister Netanyahu looked at the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which is the 2015 agreement, as a second Holocaust. President Obama saw the agreement as the route to his second Nobel Peace Prize. Both are wrong.

You have to look at the deal differently from two perspectives of time. Short-term, Obama is right. We are better off after the agreement than before. The Iranians rolled back their program. Instead of 19,000 centrifuges, we have 6,000. Of course, we want zero but 6,000 is better than 19,000. And the only nuclear reactor was closed, with cement poured into the core. And 12 tonnes of enriched uranium which can enable 10 bombs were shipped to Russia. We're better off.

On the other hand, if we have to look ahead to 2030 (or even earlier), the agreement allows them to expand their nuclear program. What if they want 60,000 centrifuges? Or 20 nuclear reactors? That is a danger if the same regime is in place. What you have to do is enjoy the 10 to 12 years and hope for a regime change and prepare yourself. It's now a competition to see who will make better use of the time. Anyway, Trump decided to walk away, and I feel Prime Minister Netanyahu had a lot to do with this decision. He convinced him that this is a bad deal. So once again, we are in the position of who will make a better use of time. There are four possible scenarios:

“If sanctions are not that painful and don't endanger the regime, Iran will be patient...and wait for a change in Washington.”

First, the sanctions are painful and the Iranians are thinking that the regime is in danger, which forces Iran to renegotiate. This chance is very low, but it's a good scenario. If you are in Washington, the administration is looking and hoping for this to be the result – even though they are not admitting it.

Second, a regime change or a regime collapse from very tough sanctions but the jury is still out on that. We don't know whether the sanctions will be as effective as they were under Obama in 2012. The Obama administration, to its credit, brought basically everybody on board. Now Trump is alone, and the Iranians hope that he will be sidelined.

Third, the Iranians walk away from the deal as well and start to enrich. There are 60,000 slots for centrifuges in Natanz. Under this scenario the Iranians are not only enriching but staying in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as they did before.

The last scenario, and an even more dangerous one, is that the Iranians take the North Korean route and break out the bomb. After all, they saw how Trump treated Kim Jong-un in Singapore. And then what are Netanyahu and Trump going to do? I don't think they thought this through before they walked away.

Before I close on this issue with the Iranians, there is a difference of thinking and culture between the Americans and the Israelis vis-a-vis the Iranians. Americans and Israelis are playing to the eight o'clock news, as it were. This is the planning horizon, and after that maybe the early morning Twitter. The Iranians are thinking a generation ahead, and I think the strategy they figure is best for them is a regime change in the US. They have to wait for 2020 elections, at the maximum 2024. And if sanctions are not that painful and don't endanger the regime, Iran will be patient, what they call “economy of resistance,” and wait for a change in Washington.

Janice Stein: Amos, you led a team at the think tank in Tel Aviv which released a draft peace plan between Israel and the Palestinians, which has got a lot of attention and which apparently has support both in the Arab world and in the White House. You've said that any responsible Israeli leader would support it. I'm wondering if you can talk to us about that.

Amos Yadlin: A think tank is exactly like the name, we think and then we put forward ideas, policy recommendations and we hope that somebody will listen. But to come with a very good plan you have to speak with all the players, the US team, my government, Palestinians, Egyptians, etc.

Janice Stein: Did you talk to Mohammed bin Salman?

Amos Yadlin: I'm not revealing who I talked to in the Arab world because it's not good for them and I can't reach everywhere. And the places I can't reach, I have asked my American friends to reach for me. The research was very seriously supported. The first assumption is that for Israel it's a window of opportunity. Israel has never been as strong as it is now; the Palestinians never so divided and weak. The Arabs that used to be our enemies are now having the same interests that we have because of what we just discussed about Iran.

They don't see Israel as the main enemy; they haven't become Zionists and they don't love us, but as a Saudi prince told me, "Amos, at least you are not killing us. The Iranians are killing us, so we know who is our enemy and who is our friend." And they told me also that unfortunately the Americans are disengaged from the Middle East. I don't blame the Americans, after two wars that took seven years in Iraq and 17 in Afghanistan and hasn't ended yet; it cost them blood and treasure: thousands of lives and trillions of dollars. And in this regard the Obama administration and the Trump administration are in the same place, though they talk differently.

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The Saudis need somebody to support them because there was an old agreement between the Saudis and the Americans – you will give us cheap energy and we will give you security – but not anymore. America doesn't need oil anymore, and Saudis do not trust the Americans like in 1991 when they saved them from Iraq's Saddam Hussein.

So back to Israel – we are in a very good strategic situation with our neighbours the Arabs, and we are enjoying a very positive relationship with the US administration. From an Israeli perspective it's an administration that gives us a lot of support. Between America, the Arabs, Israel's strength, the divisions and weakness of the Palestinians, this is a wonderful opportunity to shape the future of Israel. The future of Israel was represented by two paradigms in the last 25 years. One is saying "two-state solution now," just speak to the Palestinians and make a two-state solution, and the second paradigm is "one state." They're not saying it explicitly, only the very extreme right, but the "status quo" is basically leading to one state.

I think this option is impossible. The Palestinians are not willing to come forward to any agreement, and this is bad for Israel because Israel will not be democratic or will not be Jewish and we want to be both.

My goal is an Israel that is Jewish, democratic and secure. This is the Israel that I want. If we can reach an agreement with the Palestinians, fine; this is the highway, the Autostrada, the main way. Unfortunately, the road is too crowded with too many obstructions to overcome. Even if we have a left-wing leader in Israel and you send him to Ramallah, he cannot reach peace. The Palestinians are too divided. Hamas does not even recognize the very limited agreements that Israel offered the Palestinian Liberation Front (PLO) in Oslo. And with the Palestinians wanting the right to return, they will never agree to a Jewish state.

The alternative is a regional route. Bring the Arabs on board. For years they used the Palestinian issue to divert attention from what's going on in their own countries. Not anymore, you cannot divert attention

anymore with smartphones and the Internet, where every society can see what's going on everywhere. I spoke with some of these leaders and they said, "We spoiled the Palestinians for many years, we let them lead the Arab world to an extreme position. We will take care of them, but not as our first priority." Regional talks are now a real possibility. Of course, Israel has to give some concessions and the Prime Minister is not happy about that. He thinks that he will lose his government, he will lose his coalition, if he goes along with the plan. I think that a responsible leader should lead his party and not depend on the extreme right wing in his coalition.

There is another road that goes through an interim agreement, but at the end if nothing works, well, what is Zionism all about? It is about taking your destiny in your own hands. You know, the Jews waited for the Mashiach (Messiah) for 2,000 years, until they understood that this is not good enough because it ended with Auschwitz. Since then Jews have taken their destiny in their own hands. And I say Israel should do the same now. If it's coordinated with the Palestinians, fine. If it's coordinated with the Arabs, with the Americans, fine.

If not – and this is what I told the Prime Minister – imagine that you have a meeting with the Almighty and He gives you whatever you ask concerning Israel's future. For example, geography and security. The problem is that we can't arrange this meeting with the Almighty. But we are strong enough today to define what the Israelis want and go from there.

Janice Stein: You can see why this is an authoritative voice. Thank you for this Amos.

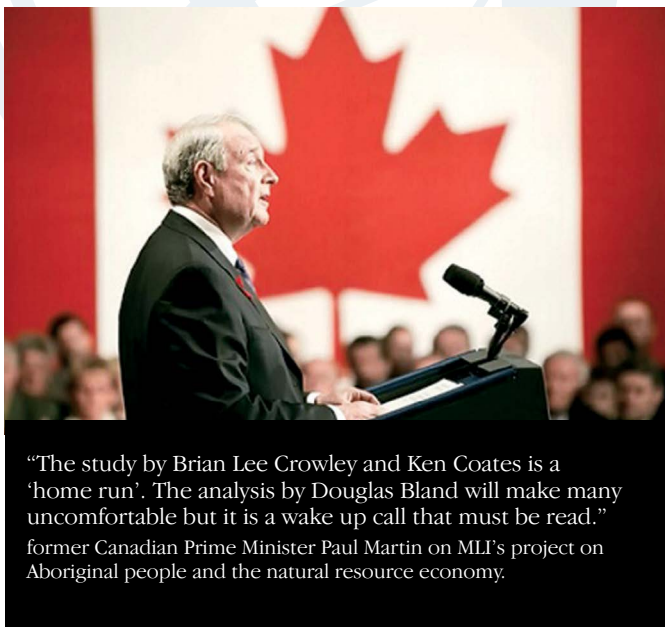


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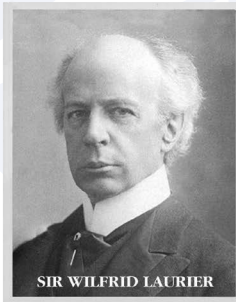
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