



**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER
FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES**

**BESA Center Experts Say:
Iran is an Intolerable Threat; Arab Spring Not Resulting in Democracy**

Summary of Remarks at the BESA Center Conference on
"Israeli Security in a New Regional Environment"

"As steep as the price for hitting Iran may be, a military strike on Iran will be less painful than the cost of living with an Iranian nuclear weapons threat," argues former Mossad head Maj. Gen. (res.) Danny Yatom. "The backlash from a strike on Iran's nuclear sites will not be as bad for Israel as will an Iran armed with nuclear weapons," he says. "I don't think that those predicting apocalyptic repercussions of a strike on Tehran are correct, and even if they are, Israel can't afford to wonder if Tehran will go crazy and bomb us."

Yatom made these remarks yesterday (November 23, 2011) at a BESA Center conference on Israel's new strategic environment, which focused on the so-called "Arab Spring" and its implications. Speaking alongside him was the Prime Minister's former National Security Advisor Maj. Gen. (res.) Uzi Dayan.

Yatom's position is diametrically opposed to that of former Mossad head Meir Dagan, who sparked significant controversy earlier this year by stating that an attack on Iran would be a foolish move that would lead to a war with an unknown outcome.

It is impossible to stake the nation's security on predictions by those who claim a nuclear Iran can be deterred and that the Iranian regime would not launch a nuclear attack, Yatom added. He acknowledged that rocket attacks would likely ensue from Lebanon and Gaza following a Western or Israeli strike against Iran, but added that Israel's response would be "so painful and crushing that rockets will come to an end. Civilian facilities and infrastructure in Lebanon and Gaza will have to be hit. Innocent civilians could be hurt. But we will have to deliver a crushing blow so that the barrage of rockets against us will not continue."

The world does not have much time left to act on Iran, the former Mossad head warned, adding that "there is an evaluation that they have crossed the red line. They have the knowledge to make the bomb. All that is needed now is the decision to do it.... The world has a year in which to halt the Iranian nuclear weapons program, probably less."

Yatom also doubted that sanctions or covert operations could stop the Iranians. "We have only two options: to let Iran get the bomb, or to use military force against their military nuclear program. I think that force will have to be used. But I don't think Israel should lead. This is, after all, a global problem.... Nevertheless, should the world stand on the sidelines, Israel will be fully entitled to use its natural right to self-defense. To us, the Iranian nuclear weapons program is an existential threat."

Maj. Gen. (res.) Uzi Dayan, former head of IDF military intelligence and national security advisor to past Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, agreed with Yatom that Iran's nuclear weapons program must be halted, but felt that sanctions which embargoed Iranian oil and gas and which outlawed transactions with the Iranian National Bank could dissuade the Iranians from proceeding. "While not an existential threat, Tehran's nuclear program is an unacceptable threat," he said.

Relating to the turmoil in the Arab world, Dayan said that the upheavals in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain and elsewhere "prove once again that the Arab-Israeli conflict is not the central problem in this region.

"The implications for Israel of this unrest are manifold," he said. "At a time of such uncertainty, Israel must preserve and secure its strategic assets. This is not the time for Israel to be taking territorial or other risks, since we don't know what is ahead. Israel must maintain defensible borders, with strategic depth, the ability to defend ourselves against attack, and in the Palestinian context – full demilitarization of areas under their control. Israel must guard against the possible emergence of three hostile Palestinian states – in Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza," he said.

Dayan also called upon Israel to take the diplomatic initiative and advocate for Kurdish independence. "There are some 30 million Kurds in a clearly-defined region spread across four countries. They deserve statehood no less than the Palestinians," he declared.

Prof. Gabi Ben-Dor of Haifa University, who spoke at the conference about Arab societies, dismissed the notion that a surge of enthusiasm for Western-style democracy lay behind the recent turmoil. "Who says that protests against dictatorship necessarily lead to democracy?" he asked. "Democracy is not what emerged from the revolution against the Tsars of Russia 100 years ago, nor has democracy emerged in many CIS states that threw off the Communist yoke. Thus there is no rational, logical or historical basis for assuming that democracy will result from the revolutions underway today in the Arab world."

Egypt has a decent chance at a long-term march towards democracy, Ben-Dor said, but only if the military maintains a degree of moderating control over the country and prevents the Islamists from exploiting the situation in order to wrest complete power.

Prof. Efraim Karsh of the Middle East Forum and King's College London was more pessimistic. "Islam remains the strongest identity framework in Egyptian society in particular, and in Arab society generally," he said. "The Arab national dictatorships that were layered over this basic Islamic identity for the past 80 years were but a thin veneer of repression. With the fall of these dictatorships, what remains is the core Islamic underpinnings of society, and these will now come to the fore. Consequently, no democratic structures, processes or values are likely to emerge in the Arab world for many generations."

Panelists at the conference disagreed about Western reactions to the Arab upheavals. Prof. Hillel Frisch of the BESA Center argued that one could discern the emergence of a clear American approach to the changes in the region – a policy construct that emphasizes the promotion of democracy while underscoring the containment of the influence of Iran, Russia and China. Prof. Karsh and Prof. Eytan Gilboa disagreed. "America is fumbling for responses, reacting differently in each case, without any obvious grand strategy," Karsh asserted. "Though American responses to each Middle Eastern state can individually make sense, overall strategy seems to be lacking, creating an image of a confused and untrustworthy America," said Gilboa.

BESA's Dr. Jonathan Rynhold argued that at present there are no chances of successfully completing a peace process with the Palestinians. A conflict management strategy or an attempt to reach a partial agreement are the only realistic policy choices in hand, he said.

BESA Center director Prof. Efraim Inbar warned of a deteriorating security situation for Israel. "States like Egypt are already losing control of their own territory, and Israel can expect increased cross-border attacks and terrorism. The Turks may ignite a confrontation over energy in the eastern Mediterranean. Israel should not be cutting its defense budget now. On the contrary, Israel should be investing more in the military and in the defense industries – so that we'll be ready for challenges five years or more down the road."