

**ARI SHAVIT'S COUNTDOWN: FORMER ISRAELI
INTELLIGENCE CHIEF
BREAKS HIS SILENCE ON IRAN**

By Ari Shavit Haaretz Sep.13, 2012

Amos Yadlin believes Israel needs to gain U.S. and world support ahead of any possible attack.

Over the past 30 years, Amos Yadlin has fought against three nuclear programs that threatened our future. In 1981 he was one of the eight F-16 pilots who attacked and destroyed the Iraqi-French nuclear reactor in Osirak. In 2007, he was the Israel Defense Forces head of Military Intelligence who, according to foreign sources, was among the leaders of the campaign that led to the destruction of the Syrian-Korean nuclear reactor in Deir ez-Zor. From 2006 to 2010 he was the national assessor who played a central role in managing the overt and covert campaign against the Iranian uranium enrichment centrifuges in Natanz and Fordo.

While the first two campaigns in which Yadlin took part culminated in resounding success, the third campaign (as of now) is a resounding failure. Yadlin is not responsible for this failure. On the contrary. Had government leaders paid more heed to the bespectacled, round-faced general, it's quite likely that Israel wouldn't find itself in the difficult situation it now faces.

Military Intelligence under Yadlin identified the Iranian threat early, and proposed smart and sophisticated ways of dealing with it. However, military intelligence did not win out in the struggle against Iran. The result is 11,000 Iranian centrifuges that have so far enriched 6.9 tons of uranium – enough raw material for five atomic bombs.

Amos Yadlin took off his military uniform 22 months ago. Since then he has scrupulously avoided making any explicit comments about Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak, and the way in which they are waging the campaign against Iran. Unlike Meir Dagan and Yuval Diskin (former heads of the Mossad and Shin Bet security service, respectively), he has not come out against the national leadership. He has made very few media appearances and has not given any extensive interviews.

Now, however, Yadlin feels he must make his voice heard. In the office from which he runs Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies, he finally has his say.

On the Iranian issue there are currently two opposing camps in Israel – the Netanyahu-Barak camp and the Dagan-Diskin camp. The former says we must bomb Iran's nuclear sites in the near future; the latter says we absolutely should not bomb. Between these two polarized schools of thought, where do you stand?

“The issue is complex and tricky, and very serious. So much so that I can't put it in simplistic terms of whether I'm with Bibi-Barak or Dagan-Diskin. What I believe in is a kind of third way.

“I agree with Netanyahu and Barak on two things. One: A nuclear bomb in the hands of a regime that says, day in and day out, that Israel must be wiped off the map, poses a very high risk to our national security. Therefore, if a bombing

could indeed prevent this bomb, it's the correct strategic move. Two: An attack on Iran won't cause the Middle East to go up in flames and won't cause Israel to incur a mortal blow.

“Whoever portrays what will happen the day after the strike as some sort of war between Gog and Magog that will cost the lives of tens of thousands of Israelis is overstating the threat. I expect that the Sunni Arab world won't be sorry to see such a strike, and that the Iranian response will be measured and calculated, and absorbable. The damage it causes will be much smaller than the damage of a nuclear Iran.

“At the same time, I agree with the criticism of the prime minister and defense minister in two areas. They say that time has almost run out, but I say there still is time. The decisive year is not 2012 but 2013. Maybe even early 2014. We have at least half a year left before we reach the true crossroad where we will have to make the fateful decision. But even when we reach the crossroad – in order for an Israeli strike to really prevent an Iranian nuclear bomb for a long time to come, it must enjoy legitimacy.

“Today, Israel does not have enough legitimacy. The world today is averse to the use of force, and the world does not accept the concept of the zone of immunity [whereby Iran's nuclear facilities would be impervious to military strikes]. Our positions on the Palestinian issue are also weighing very heavily here.

“The international community believes there is still time for diplomacy and sanctions. Consequently, our legitimacy battery is almost empty. Above all, we must cease butting heads with the United States and try to reach a strategic understanding with it. Israel must shape a policy and take action to ensure that, if we are compelled to attack, the world will be behind us on the day we do so.”

So, are Netanyahu and Barak crazy doomsday prophets or responsible adults? Are they behaving rationally or irrationally?

“I don't think Netanyahu and Barak are crazy. They made important achievements between 2009 and 2011. They strengthened the IDF and enabled it to strengthen the military option, and made it very credible. They made proper and positive diplomatic use of the military option. They managed to spur the international community to impose heavy sanctions on Iran. They contributed to making the American position more assertive, and President Obama explicitly pledged to prevent a nuclear Iran.

“But over the past year, Netanyahu and Barak went too far. They turned the screw one time too many. As a result, exaggerated panic has been created among the public, the Israeli economy has been hurt and oil prices have also gone up. The harsh responses to all this from the diplomatic and military leadership in the United States has harmed deterrence. The impression has been given that Israel is interfering in internal American politics. This is why we now see such tension between the two countries. Instead of Washington and Jerusalem slinging arrows together at Iran, they're slinging arrows at each other.

“In pilot lingo, I would say that their policy has reached the stalling point. It's stopped being useful, and in a certain sense has also even become dangerous. Both former IDF Chief of Staff [Gabi] Ashkenazi and current Chief of Staff [Benny] Gantz have done faithful work in building up the military option versus Iran. It was uncalled for to treat them and the senior officer ranks with such

contempt and disdain. There is no basis for saying that if the current general staff had been the general staff in 1967, we wouldn't have won the Six-Day War."

Allow me to return to the basic question. Perhaps the fear of a nuclear Iran is overblown? Perhaps a nuclear Iran is not necessarily a catastrophe? Perhaps we need to accept it and adjust to it?

"I don't like the comparisons to the 1930s and to the Holocaust. I don't think that if Iran obtains nuclear weapons, it will launch a nuclear missile at Tel Aviv the next day. I believe in our capabilities and in our deterrence, and I think that this was precisely why Israel was founded: so it would have the ability to defend the Jewish people.

"And yet, a nuclear Iran is intolerable due to four very serious considerations.

-It's unclear whether Iran will be a rational player. We may well be dealing with a culture that sanctifies death and glorifies 'martyrs' and suicide bombers, and has a wholly different attitude toward life than we do. Of course, there will not be symmetry between big Iran and little Israel: A single atomic bomb will not kill six million people here, but if it explodes in the center of the country and takes 20,000 lives, life here will become very problematic, if it can go on at all.

- "There is also a danger of unplanned and uncontrolled escalation: There is no hotline between Tel Aviv and Tehran, and no other stabilizing mechanisms between us and the Iranians, so the danger of an unplanned nuclear confrontation is significant.

-And, finally, nuclear proliferation is a near certainty: If Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and other states go nuclear, a multipolar nuclear system will come into being in the Middle East – and by definition this will be unstable and very dangerous.

Such a situation – in which there will also be substate players – will create a big temptation to make use of nuclear weapons and could lead to the occurrence of a nuclear event. So the answer to your question is clear: We mustn't get carried away with panic or sow anxiety, but Iran must be prevented from going nuclear."

You've convinced me. I'm with you, but right now Iran is quite close to going nuclear. You've followed the struggle against a nuclear Iran since 2000 – first as air force chief of staff, then as military attache in Washington and then as head of Military Intelligence. What opportunities did the international community and Israel have to stop Iran? What was done in the last decade, what wasn't done, and what should have been done?

- "The first strategic track that tried to stop the Iranian nuclear program was dialogue. It was tried by the Europeans and it was tried by the Obama administration, but it failed.

- The second strategic track was sanctions. But the sanctions were applied too little, too late, and even now there are big holes in them – Russia, China, India.

- As was previously published, the third track was some type of secret campaign against Iran. There were people who pinned great hopes on this, but – if it did indeed take place – it is now clear that it only delayed the Iranians but did not stop them. It may also have had a certain anesthetizing effect, since it gave the illusion that a solution was found.

- The fourth strategic track was preparation for military intervention, and
- the fifth track was waiting for a regime change in Iran.

“As of now, the first three tracks and the fifth track have not yielded the desired results. I still think we should wait and see whether the heavy sanctions imposed in July 2012 will bring about a change, but up to now the change has not happened. The sanctions are hurting the Iranians, but they aren’t yet altering their behavior or eroding their determination. So the ‘bomb or bombing’ dilemma could become a real dilemma in the coming year.

“But this, too, mustn’t be understood in a simplistic way. If we do not act wisely, a situation of ‘bomb and bombing’ could certainly arise. We could lose out on both ends and suffer the worst of both worlds. To avoid this, we must have that close cooperation with the United States that I spoke about. That’s what I meant when I said I am seeking a third way.”

I’m not sure I understood. Please explain.

“What worries me isn’t the day of the strike. I know our intelligence and our air force well. I’m certain they have developed the operational capability to deal a serious blow to the Iranian nuclear program. Whoever doubts Israel’s capability will be surprised. The military option that the IDF has prepared is genuine and credible.

“And Israel can also cope with what happens the day after the strike. In a situation where the Sunnis are so fearful of a Shi’ite nuclear power, I don’t believe a regional war will develop. The likelihood that, in their present situation, the Syrians will fire missiles at Tel Aviv is not high. They won’t lay themselves on the line for the Iranians. Hezbollah is a force that we will clash with sooner or later – with or without a strike on Iran. So in my estimation, what we can expect is some sort of small-scale copy of the 1991 Scud attacks, and the 2006 rocket fire [from Hezbollah] and the bombings in Buenos Aires [on the Israeli Embassy in 1992 and a Jewish community center in 1994]. I am not thrilled about that. I do not take that lightly.

“Without a doubt, the day after the strike will be a lot less pleasant than it is now. It may be necessary to evacuate some population centers at the time of the confrontation. But I’m not panicking. I don’t accept the position of those who are paralyzed by the fear of rocket fire on Israel. There is no comparison between the risks of this scenario and the risks of a nuclear Middle East.

“But what does worry me is the decade after the strike. Even assuming that the technical strike succeeds, as I am convinced it will, it will give us just a few years. And it could be another decade before there is regime change in Iran. So in order to bridge this gap between a successful Israeli strike and preventing a nuclear Iran, we need the international community and the United States. We need a sanctions regime that keeps getting stronger and doesn’t fall apart. We need an Iranian understanding that the strike could be repeated. We need the world to continue the work that we started, and not to sabotage it. As things look now, an Israeli strike at this point in time will not achieve this result since we do not have enough legitimacy and we do not have sufficient strategic intimacy with the United States. Therefore, even if the strike goes well, and even if the day after the

strike isn't a day of utter and terrible destruction, the final result could be that we get an Iranian bombing and an Iranian bomb."

Okay, now I get it. So I hereby appoint you as our leader and I ask: What are you going to do? If you were the prime minister and defense minister, what would you do?

"I repeat, the bombing option is not out of the question if it achieves its objective, and if it is done with a strong basis of legitimacy. But you have to remember that the objective is not the strike itself, but preventing Iran from obtaining military nuclear capability. Therefore, if I know that one bombing will stop the bomb, I'm in favor. But if the bombing does not bring in its wake a worldwide campaign that turns the military achievement of a successful strike into a strategic achievement of stopping the Iranian nuclear program, there is no point in carrying out this bombing.

"We can accomplish the bombing by ourselves, but we can't stop Iran's nuclear program by ourselves. So it all depends on the United States being with us. And what I would do as leader is to enter an honest and genuine dialogue with the United States. I believe that President Obama intends to prevent Iran from obtaining military nuclear capability. But in the environment in which he lives, there are some who feel otherwise. So the chance of the United States using force to stop Iran is little better than 50 percent, I believe.

"The purpose of the dialogue is to raise this likelihood. To ask the Americans to commit themselves now to more than they have committed so far. To find out – honestly and with discretion – where exactly they stand. To formulate binding red lines, together with them. One of the problems facing the Americans is that when they plan a military operation they are planning an operation with broad security margins, so it involves the employment of massive force. They are reluctant to undertake such a broad-scale operation because it means an all-out war on another Islamic country. But if instead of clashing we conduct a dialogue of allies, we can combine American technological capabilities with Israeli powers of improvisation, Israeli creativity and Israeli combat experience. The result could be a surgical strike that is not directed against the Iranian people and does not entail an invasion of Iran or war in Iran.

"If, the morning after the attack, the Iranians awake to find that, aside from their nuclear assets, they still hold all their other assets – the regime, the military, oil – they will know that they have something to lose. They will know that if they respond forcefully, they will lose much more. So it is quite likely that an attack of this kind could stop the Iranian nuclear program without igniting an all-out war. If after the U.S. presidential election [in November] the elected president is presented with an operational solution of this sort, I think it is very likely that he will adopt it. Thus it will be assured that the Iranians will not have a bomb, but if there is a strike, its implications will not be grave – for the United States or Israel."

Benjamin Netanyahu apparently thinks otherwise. He thinks there is no chance the Americans will use force, and that the right time to act is now.

“We absolutely must not do anything before the election in the United States. We mustn’t try to take advantage of some fleeting opportunity that seems convenient. We made that mistake already in 1956 [the Sinai Campaign]. Ben-Gurion insisted that we wouldn’t go to war without the backing of a superpower. We must do the same now. The zone of immunity is broader and more flexible than some people describe, so there is no need for an immediate action. As a democratic country, we also have the duty to exhaust all other possibilities before embarking on a preemptive war. Therefore, we need to cool things down, wait until after the U.S. election and then develop a real dialogue with whoever is elected. I believe that such a dialogue could yield the right answer to the Iranian nuclear challenge.”