

Former top Mossad officer on Israel's security challenges
CBS News

In this episode of Intelligence Matters, host Michael Morell speaks with Zohar Palti, former senior Mossad officer and head of the Israeli Defense Force'

Political-Military Bureau, about his career, Israel's approach to the Iran nuclear issue and Tehran's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Palti shares his views on the value of intelligence to key decision points in Israel's historic national security choices and the bond between the Mossad and CIA. He also discusses the current top threats to Israel today.



HAZEM BADER/AFP via Getty Images

HIGHLIGHTS:

Israel's approach to Ukraine: "I think that not in every security issue that's happening in the world Israel has to be in the focus. We have to do whatever we can in order to help from a humanitarian point of view to the Ukrainians; they are friends of ours and we send medical support and we send helmets and we send so many other humanitarian aid. And it seems to me that we should continue to do things like that... I'm counting on NATO. I'm counting on you guys. I'm counting on all the European countries that are doing so many things and good ones, over here. And we will take care of our business over here in the neighborhood. And we have a rough neighborhood."

The Abraham Accords: "I'm so happy as a security guy to see that the first and foremost was to establish the civilian side, the commercial flights, the private sector

and things like that. And only then came the ministry of defense and all the other ones. It seems to me we are building it right. It's peace between the people with an open heart and open mind."

Striking Iran? "It's not that we're looking for to attack somebody. The only things that we care is about our family, the existence of Israel, the safety of our children, and, of course, the stability in the region. As long as we don't see an imminent threat like it used to be in 2011-12, we'll say always let's give a chance to other options."

MICHAEL MORELL: Zohar, welcome to Intelligence Matters. It is always good to talk to you. And it's great to get you on the podcast. I'm really excited about our conversation. So thank you very much for joining us.

ZOHAR PALTÍ: Thank you so much for having me. It's great to be here and thank you so much, Michael.

MICHAEL MORELL: So Zohar, I want to spend a little bit of time talking about your career and then we'll get into some substantive issues for the rest of the discussion. But I want to start with your career. You joined the Israeli Defense Forces as an 18-year-old and you very quickly become an intelligence officer. And I'm wondering if becoming an intelligence officer was something that the IDF chose for you, or was it something that you raised your hand and said, 'I want to be an intelligence officer?' How did that work?

ZOHAR PALTÍ: So as a matter of fact, I started in the Army, of course, and as you said, quite after a very short time, they decided that it's better that I move to the intelligence course. And I was a couple of months as a simple soldier, and then I went to an officer course. After one and a half year I was an officer, intelligence officer in the northern front when all the IDF used to spend in Lebanon, it was like '84. And since then I'm in the intelligence - a combination of the military intelligence and of course the Mossad later on. And this is it.

MICHAEL MORELL: So Zohar you spend nearly a quarter century, a little bit less than a quarter century as an intelligence officer in the IDF. And obviously, much, much happened in those 25 years - two intifadas with the Palestinians, multiple wars in Lebanon against the PLO and against Hezbollah, wars in Gaza against Hamas. Wondering if you can share any memories of your time in the IDF with our listeners?

ZOHAR PALTÍ: I think the generation that, like me, that was recruited to the Army at '82, was very much under the influence of our staying in Lebanon for 17 or 18 years, and the fact that we had to serve over there and thanks to former Prime Minister Ehud Barak that took us out in 2000. This is one milestone for my military service.

And the other one, of course, is as the CT chief in the military intelligence, the second intifada. It was horrible to have, like, dozens of suicide attacks in a democratic country like us in the main cities like Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Hadera and all the other ones. That was a defining moment for us. 2007, the attack on the Syrian nuclear reactor - I think this is the main milestones that I can draw right now.

MICHAEL MORELL: You actually, Zohar, you actually spent time in Lebanon. Is that correct?

ZOHAR PALTI: Yeah, I was an intelligence officer of an infantry brigade, the Golani Brigade, and I was the deputy intelligence officer of the Northern Division of Israel that spread all over the Lebanese border. And I served in other operational units in the military intelligence. I spent a lot of time in Lebanon.

MICHAEL MORELL: So Zohar, in 2006, in the middle of that Second Lebanon war, somebody named Meir Dagan, who we're going to come back to in a second, then the director of Mossad, brings you to Mossad to run the counter-terrorism division in the intelligence branch.

Then Meir makes you the head of the Strategic Analysis Division in Mossad. And then Tamir Pardo, who is the successor director to Meir Dagan, nominates you to be the director of intelligence, the person in charge of all of the analysis at Mossad.

And that's where you and I really worked closely together during my time as head of analysis at CIA and then as the deputy director. And I'd love to ask you a couple of questions about that period of time.

The first is just to talk a little bit about Meir Dagan, who I met many times, and I really found to be a remarkable man. So I'm just wondering if you could talk about Meir a little bit.

ZOHAR PALTI: Sure. No doubt that Meir was a remarkable guy. And mainly, he was a commander. He loved the people. He came from the Army, used to be a major general in the Israeli army. And then Prime Minister Sharon nominated him to be the director of Mossad.

Dagan thought the spirit, first and foremost, is the people. And you, Michael, as former DI, you understand how important is the people - actually the ones that are doing the job. They are the ones that are leading the organization. And Meir gave them so much respect. Used to sit with all the analysts like 2 hours every week to listen to them, to debate with them as equals. That's one.

Second issue, Dagan gave the priority to the Mossad. First and foremost, counter-proliferation and mainly the Iranian issue. And the second issue is counter-terrorism, to foil any attempt to hurt, of course, Israelis and Jewish all over the world and in Israel, and, of course, to help to our allies and some friendly country otherwise.

And we've done a remarkable job. All the intelligence services leading by Dagan. Dagan was a man of his word. He was courage enough, not only in the battlefield, it was courage enough in order to say exactly what he thought in closed rooms, whether the politician or the decision makers like it or whether not. And no doubt a really, really impressive guy.

MICHAEL MORELL: Meir was there at the birth of the state of Israel, wasn't he?

ZOHAR PALTI: Meir - as a matter of fact, there was a very famous picture in his office of a child that is raising his hands, a Jewish, of course, during the Holocaust. And Dagan gave us the sense - he was an immigrant from East Europe, and he gave us the sense, 'Guys, never again.'

And that's what he told me was important - to prevent for a country like Iran, for example, a country that are saying that they want to eliminate the state of Israel. The

slogan was, 'Never again,' and the Mossad - his point of view was that the Mossad had to lead all their efforts in order to foil the Iranian attempts to get their nuclear and military nuclear capabilities.

And this week, yesterday it was the memorial for the Holocaust over here. And no doubt that the legacy that Dagan gave us in this issue is still here.

MICHAEL MORELL: So Zohar, I think that's a great transition to the second question I wanted to ask you about during your time as director of intelligence at Mossad, and that's the Iranian nuclear program, something you and I worked very closely on.

During the time we were working on it in 2010, 2011, 2012, the Iranians were moving rapidly forward on uranium enrichment, expanding their program, deepening their sophistication.

And you were the senior intelligence analyst, Israeli intelligence analyst in the room for discussions about whether Israel should attack Iran's nuclear program in 2011, 2012.

And I'd love if you could talk a little bit about how close Israel actually came during that period to attacking Iran. And talk a little bit about the role of intelligence in that discussion and how important it was.

ZOHAR PALTI: First of all, you know, Israel is a democratic country and by law, we're under the instruction of the Israeli government. Until the Israeli government is not taking the decision, the culture in Israel is saying that in a closed room, the intelligence community is not only allowed, but must say whatever they think.

And my job in that room as the director of intelligence was to crystallize hundreds and dozens of hours [of] internal discussions with my analysts and with the professionals in the Mossad, and in the intelligence community all over Israel, and to try to crystallize the bottom line to the decision makers, whether this is the right time to do it or not.

We used to be very close because we got an instruction back then from our decision makers to prepare ourselves. And we did. But at the same time, there have been discussions all the time whether we should do it or not.

And based on the intel that back then we used to have, we knew that the Iranians are doing quite a good job regarding the enrichment program - and back then they have several of SQs, if you remember.

But at the same time, we didn't have any indication that they're actually trying to build the bomb. And we said that as long as they're not actually weaponizing and don't have what we call the weaponized group that orchestrates all the components together, we should wait with it. And this is not the right moment to do it. Right now, a decade after it, I can say that probably the intel was right back then.

MICHAEL MORELL: And Zohar, is it safe to say that intelligence was a very important factor in the decision-making of the prime minister and the rest of the security cabinet at that time?

ZOHAR PALTI: I think even more, that the intelligence was a crucial one. By the way, always in the Israeli system, the intelligence is crucial. Any meeting, any gathering, [is] starting always with the intel picture, whether it's a tactical one or whether it's a strategic one, and the change or the things that are not changing in the entire picture

are part of the discussion at the right moment, when we are doing the gathering with our policymakers.

And I think it was crucial and the intel [was] very, very much influential regarding the issue, whether to do it or not. And I have to add something more than that: it's great that we have close friends and allies like you, Michael, and with the agency and I know with other partners that we have in Europe that we can share so many things together; it's so important to all of us.

MICHAEL MORELL: Zohar, just one more career question. You finished your career as the head of the political-military bureau of Israel's Ministry of Defense. What took you there? And then what's the role of the Ministry of Defense's political-military bureau? What was your job?

ZOHAR PALTI: In American terms, it's a very it's like equivalent - not in the scale, of course, America is very much bigger than us - to the position of the Undersecretary for Policy in the Pentagon. Meaning everything regarding the policy of the minister of defense was under my portfolio, and, of course, to keep the relationship and connection, first and foremost, that we have in the United States of America and mainly with the Pentagon, because our minister of defense is working with DoD and of course, with the American Army, CENTCOM, UCOMM, all the other ones, and all the other ministers of defense. In other words you're the one that is holding the relationship, keeping the strategic dialogues and things like that.

This is the portfolio of this job if I'm trying to crystallize that. And of course, the best thing that I had during the last two years is to implement the Abraham Accords. And this is a game-changer, and to establish a central defense relationship between us and the Arab countries, meaning mainly the Gulf, and of course, the Americans.

MICHAEL MORELL: So, Zohar, is it safe to say that the Abraham Accords took the relationship between Israel and some of the Gulf countries from the security realm, which it had been growing, into the political realm and into the public realm. Is that a fair statement?

ZOHAR PALTI: It's exactly, exactly how you phrase it. It's so beautiful. And this time we learned the lesson from - I think we're trying to learn the lesson from some of the mistakes that we've done with Egypt and Jordan decades ago.

And I'm so happy as a security guy to see that the first and foremost was to establish the civilian side, the commercial flights, the private sector and things like that. And only then came the ministry of defense and all the other ones. It seems to me we are building it right. It's peace between the people with an open heart and open mind. It's really amazing to see how many direct flights we have right now to Marrakesh and to Karzai and to, of course, Abu Dhabi and Dubai. It's really, for a guy like me to land with an airplane, with the flag of Israel on the tail - and many, many years it was landing in those places, not exactly with the Israeli flags.

It's great and we're very proud about it and we are grateful to our prime minister back then that used to do it, of course, to the Americans for president and mainly the courage that the Arab leaders, mainly the UAE guys and the Bahrainis and the Americans took very, very bold decisions. And it seems to me it's great.

MICHAEL MORELL: So, Zohar, I want to turn to some more substantive issues here. And the first one I want to ask you about is Israel's approach to Russia's invasion of

Ukraine. There's been some criticism of Israel's reluctance not to more strongly rebuke Russia. Can you kind of put that into context for us?

ZOHAR PALTI: First of all, there is no words to express how devastating the situation is. And, of course, that every person that sees whatever is happening in Ukraine, you can't ignore from that. And it's really devastating. But at the same times, you have to understand that Israel is in a unique place. On one hand, we have so many balls in the air right now. It's the last days of Ramadan, where two days before the independence, two days ago, three days ago, there had been a rocket that was launched from Lebanon. At the same time, I heard in the news that there was a courtesy visit of some air force in Syria dealing with the Iranians and Hezbollah targets. Simultaneously, we have some tension right now in the Temple Mount. At the same time, we have a challenge from Gaza. I think that not in every security issue that's happening in the world Israel has to be in the focus. We have to do whatever we can in order to help from a humanitarian point of view to the Ukrainians; they are friends of ours and we send medical support and we send helmets and we send so many other humanitarian aid. And it seems to me that we should continue to do things like that. But look, everything should be judged, whether it's military aid, this one or another. I'm counting on NATO. I'm counting on you guys. I'm counting on all the European countries that are doing so many things and good ones, over here. And we will take care of our business over here in the neighborhood. And we have a rough neighborhood.

MICHAEL MORELL: Zohar, I want to spend most of our time on Iran. Let me start by asking you about the threat that Iran poses to Israel. How do you see that threat?

ZOHAR PALTI: First of all, there is the Iranian people and there is the Iranian regime. With the Iranian people, as you know, we have a long history and we have nothing against the Iranian people. And I hope that they don't have nothing against us. And as we say over here in the neighborhood, 'Inshallah,' one day we will come back to be friends of them. The main problem right now is the way the Iranian, this regime, they're really fanatics. And I spoke earlier regarding the Holocaust, the Memorial Day that we just have a day ago, and Israel will never allow any country around the world to threaten our existential and our rights to live freely in Israel. And the Iranian regime pose[s] a main problem to Israel by saying that he wants to eliminate the state of Israel out of the map. We take it personally. And we have a legacy, as I said before, 'Never again.' And we had two prime ministers in our history that paved the way for us with our doctrine. First one was back in '81, with the Osirak reactor in Iraq. The second one was Prime Minister Olmert in 2007 with the Syrian nuclear reactor. And if Iran would challenge us, we know exactly what we have to do. This is regarding the nuclear issue. The other issue that is, of course, the regional one, and the fact that the Iranians are behind so many terrorist attacks in the last two or three decades. About you as an American in Iraq, in Afghanistan, so many lives of your people, they took. They are challenging right now, your allies and our friends in the Gulf. September 14 attack in 2019 against the Saudis [was] a vicious one. They're helping the Houthis.

They're helping the Shia militias in Iraq. They're using surface-to-surface missiles, cruise missiles, UAVs. Iran is destabilizing the region. And over here, this is the main problem that we have with Iran right now. If you take [out] the Iranian issue and the Iranian aggression from the region, it seems to me that everybody, mainly the Arab countries, would be happy.

MICHAEL MORELL: Zohar, I'd love to ask you, the Biden administration is negotiating with the Iranians on a possible return to the 2015 nuclear agreement. Those negotiations have been on again, off again. I wonder what your view is about whether we should return to that agreement or not, and why.

ZOHAR PALTI: First of all, it seems to me that the Americans have their own policy in order to decide what is [in] the American interest and whatnot. I don't think that I'm in a position to say to the Americans what to think and what to do. I can reflect the Israeli perspective on that matter. And we go back to the agreement in 2013 and 2015 - the intermediate agreement and then the final agreement in 2015. Back then in 2013 - and I think you've been back then in the business. In 2011, '12, you've done great. The sanctions used to work beautifully. And the Iranians used to lose between \$60 to \$80 billion a year. And we came to you back then and we said, 'Guys, we're not against an agreement or something like that, but it should be a good agreement, and a good agreement - Don't rush into it.' And I think it was back then a mistake to give the Iranians advanced centrifuges. Back then to use to have only the IR-1 and only the start of the IR-2. The agreement gave them the permission, or the authority, to speed centrifuge of the IR-4, IR-6 and IR-8. This is eight times and ten times faster than the IR-1s. And right now, not so many years after the agreement, the Iranians are, sadly, in a quite impressive achievement regarding the enrichment program. And this is not - for them, it's not a bottleneck anymore. This administration, when it came, you spoke about [a] 'longer and stronger' agreement. I don't see [it] right now, not longer and not stronger. And it seems to me that we have a lot of question marks - and I don't know all the details, that's why I don't know to tell you whether it's a good one or bad one or something like that. But no doubt that we have some question mark regarding whether [they are] willing to compromise about some of these issues. The other one is the Iranians are dragging their feet. And for the last couple of months, we see that Iran [is] taking advantage, that this negotiation is stretching. And we're in a situation that I'm not sure that I like what I see right now.

MICHAEL MORELL: Zohar, how's Iran different, how's the region different in a world in which there is an agreement, and in a world in which there isn't an agreement? I know it's a tough question.

ZOHAR PALTI: Yeah, that's a tough one. But certainly if I'm trying to give you a professional answer, I don't see right now something substantial regarding the region - not speaking right now about the nuclear program - about the region that will make the difference. Meaning, the Iranians [are] aggressive with agreements and without agreements.

The Iranians are using the Houthis in Yemen and the Iranian and using the Iraqi territory in order to compromise the security of the region over here. Of course, in Syria. Of course, in Lebanon, with Hezbollah; the Iranians right now, [are] doing

serious terrorist attacks and challenging and compromising the security all over the Middle East.

I'm not sure -and over here it's [an] understatement - that having an agreement with the Iranians limited them. On the contrary, we know that the agreement is not about to touch those issues. So I'm not sure that there is a big difference regarding the region. Sadly, I'm saying it.

MICHAEL MORELL: So Zohar I understand the regional point and I agree with it 100%. What about on the nuclear front? What's the difference in terms of the development of Iran's nuclear program, nuclear weapons program, between a deal and no deal?

ZOHAR PALTI: Again, I'm not sure that I know all the details because right now nothing [is] revealed yet.

I'll give you the best scenario: the best scenario, that if we have 'longer and stronger,' if the international community have the ability through the IAEA to monitor Iran 24/7, with all the technological measures that we have today in 2022, that the inspection can come to whichever side they want, to monitor 24/7, to deal with open files - all those issues, we have to address them.

If the agreement is about to give all these issues, it seems to me it's pretty good. But based on what we understand for the time being, I'm not sure that we have an answer for all of this.

If there will be an agreement - and I really doubt [it] at the time being, but then again, let's wait and see - it's supposed to stop the enrichment progress of the Iranians. And right now they are spinning centrifuges and enriching to 60% and of course, to 3.5. And I hope that all the material will go out, and this is good.

But at the same time, I have to be very concerned regarding the fact that this agreement, even if it will be signed 5 minutes from now, there is a sense over here and in like several of years from now, in 2026 and then in '35, almost all bets are off. And if we think that an agreement would give us a sense that the Iranian issue is behind us - no. Even if there is an agreement, the day after afterwards, we should continue to deal with it and to monitor it and to see that Iran are no more violating everything.

And I doubt it, because always the Iranians used to try to deceive. We saw it in the archive. We saw it in other issues. The Iranians are doing really bad things regarding the nuclear issue.

MICHAEL MORELL: So, Zohar, you were against attacking Iran in 2012, but you're not against ever attacking Iran. Is that safe to say?

ZOHAR PALTI: It's not that we're looking to attack somebody. The only things that we care is about our family, the existence of Israel, the safety of our children, and, of course, the stability in the region.

As long as we don't see an imminent threat like it used to be in 2011, 12, we'll say always, 'Let's give a chance to other options.' And even today I would say the same. But, at the same time, when we're coming to the moment that we will understand that in two months, three months, two weeks or something like that, from the time that one day - I hope that is not current - is going to jeopardize our existence, we will have to operate.

There is no doubt. I spoke before about the legacy of back in '91 regarding Iraq, 2007 in Syria, and if we have to do it a third time, we're willing to do it. Whether we're looking for that, whether it's a must - No, I think that there is a lot of room to the international community to do a lot of things in order to do it.

And right now, it seems to me the international community, after so many months that they gave so much room to this negotiation, that the Iranians right now give cold shoulder to the international community, it's about how to stretch the sanctions, to tighten them, and to give the Iranians the sense, 'Guys, what you see right now, it's kids' stuff compared to what we have the ability to do.'

MICHAEL MORELL: Zohar, in a couple of minutes we have left here, I wonder if you might want to comment a little bit about the CIA. You spent a lot of time working with the organization. Would just love your thoughts on the agency.

ZOHAR PALTÍ: I will be a bit emotional over here, because rarely I have a chance to answer a question like that.

And you know, to be the CT chief of my organization with you guys, I always used to have the honor to see you after September 11 and what you've done all over the world with the global war on terrorism.

And I think you have real heroes in the agencies that gave so many hope and protected almost the entire world from al-Qaida and the global jihad phenomena. And your organization deserves so much credit for saving so many lives. And I know that I'm speaking for myself, but I know that a lot of people over in Israel owes you, and, of course, people over here in the region, mainly Arab countries are obliged and really many, many thanks to your people.

It used to be a hell of a job with counterterrorism. And recently, I have to give the credit to your intelligence community - I think it's more than your agency, I think it's other agencies as well, but because you ask about the agency - the fact that people used to give such a brilliant intel picture about what's supposed to be with the invasion to Ukraine. I mean, in the last year, it wasn't the first priority of no one. And nevertheless, it was remarkable intel picture. Good job.

MICHAEL MORELL: So, Zohar, two last questions from me. One is, I want to ask you what you see as the biggest threat to the future of Israel.

ZOHAR PALTÍ: That's a tough one. And I will say something not natural to me: I don't think that we have something existential right now from the outside.

If you ask me and you squeeze me, I'm much more concerned about our internal problems, the fact that we see so much diversity among the Israelis. Not a lot of tolerance among ourselves. We need to be much more respectful to each other. And if it will not work always like as a first, and to understand that we have no other place to go, and that at the end of the day, we are stuck with each other, no matter what our political point of views and things like that.

We can overcome and face, again, any challenge from the outside. And I think this is the main concern that a lot of us have over here, how we we're bridging the gaps between ourselves.

MICHAEL MORELL: Boy, I have exactly the same concern about my own country. So the last question, Zohar - we have a lot of people from the intelligence community, particularly analysts, who listen to this program. And we have a lot of college students who also listen to the program who want to be intelligence analysts.

And I just want to very quickly ask you, since you spent so much time doing this, what makes a good intelligence analyst?

ZOHAR PALTI: The analyst, I think a good one, it's a person that rely on deep knowledge on what the subject that he is responsible. You have to be curious. Sometimes you have to be doubtful. You have to read a lot. First thing in the morning, you have to read; last thing before going to sleep, you have to read. He's the man. There is no second, second one to him in the knowledge on the subject that he is responsible. He has to be totally devoted to the cause. I think he has to be with the creative thinking and operational one as well. To translate the intel into operations. He has to be [versed] from the tactical issues to the strategic ones, that if there is a question to this analyst, he is the man you have to give the answers, whether it's tactical or whether it's a strategic point. You have to know the intelligence community inside his own country and mainly outside with partners and friends. You have to compare notes with them. And not to be afraid to say: 'On the contrary.' It's more than not to be afraid. He has to be courage[ous] enough to say exactly his professional opinion in closed rooms and to give recommendations to the policy makers regarding policy. In Israel, we don't have downtown. We don't have something like that. We, from lieutenant, have to give our recommendation to the decision-makers, even if it's policy issues.

MICHAEL MORELL: Zohar, that's fantastic. Thank you so much for joining us. It's been a real honor to have you on the show. And it's always a special pleasure of mine to speak with you.

ZOHAR PALTI: Thank you. Thank you so much for inviting me. It's great to be here. And really, the best to everybody.