

Q&A with Former Israeli Shin Bet Director and Command-in-Chief of the Israeli Navy — Ami Ayalon on Iran, Gaza, and Posturing the Israeli Navy for the Future

Description

“The essence of victory is not to kill your enemy; it is to change your political reality.”

— Ami Ayalon

Editor’s Note: This article is presented in a question-and-answer format, with the Irregular Warfare Initiative’s Maritime Program (facilitated by [Christopher Booth](#) and [Walker Mills](#)) interviewing [Ami Ayalon](#). This piece has been edited for clarity and readability, as spoken language differs from how text is read on the page.

Amichai — Ami Ayalon served as the Director of the Israeli Shin Bet from 1995 to 2000, following over 30 years in the Israeli Navy, including time as the commander-in-chief of the Navy. He began his naval career as a commando in the Shayetet 13 and eventually rose to lead the unit, which serves as one of the Israeli Defense Force’s primary reconnaissance forces with special emphasis on maritime intelligence gathering, counter-terrorism, hostage rescue, sabotage, and direct-action missions. It is considered a peer of the U.S. Navy SEALs and British Special Boat Service. He is also a recipient of Israel’s highest decoration, the Medal of Valor. He is also the author of [Friendly Fire: How Israel Became the Worst Enemy of Itself and Its Hope for the Future](#).

Q: Let’s start with current events. How do you see the war against Iran progressing, and how do you see it ending?

A: It will start with the second. It will be the decision of one person [to end the war] — President Trump. He decided to start the war, and he will decide to end the war. But, what will not happen is Iran will not be a democracy.

Before you invaded Iraq in 2003, there was some similarity because Israel played a major role in your decision. The way I understand our political and intelligence organization, we pushed America to Iraq. It was in our interest. At that time, I had and still have a very good Palestinian friend, and we were traveling all over the world. We came to America to explain why the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a dominant factor in the instability and the future of the Middle East. It’s a common

denominator—the Israeli-Palestinian conflict unites the Muslim and the Arab countries. The West Bank shapes the way the Arab countries see [Israel]. For most Israelis, it is a blind spot.

Solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will not solve all problems [in the Middle East], but doing so will enable many options to create different coalitions and to deal with Iran, which gains an advantage positioning itself as a defender of Palestine. So, we met a very important leader in the Pentagon. And I asked him, “What are you looking to achieve in Iraq? What does your victory look like on the day after?”

He said, “Once we get rid of tyranny, democracy will flourish.” And my friend, the professor, told him, “My family tree starts in Jerusalem during the seventh century, during the time of Muhammad—so I know something about the Middle East. Let me tell you something about the Middle East. In the Middle East, once you get rid of tyranny, everything shall explode *except* democracy.” And my friend was right.

Iran will not be stable even if we destroy the regime, I think that it will be much closer to what we saw in Iraq [after the 2003 invasion]. It will be a reality of chaos. I think that no matter what happens in Iran, we will see more violence against American, Israeli, and Jewish targets everywhere—not only in Israel—but in Europe, in America, in South America. And people will say, “It’s antisemitism.” It’s not antisemitism. It’s backlash—the consequences of events in the Middle East.

President Trump is saying that he is looking for absolute victory, total surrender. This is not the Second World War. There is no absolute or total victory. Eight months ago, after the Twelve Day War, we destroyed most of what can be destroyed in Iran.

There is a positive scenario in which Iran agrees with Israel and America that Iran will not have any enrichment capability, and they give up any capability of building missiles. This would be a major victory. But again, it will not be a total victory, because we have to understand that even if we shall win the battlefield or the war, the instability in the Middle East will probably increase.

There is another, of course, scenario in which there is no agreement and conflict continues at low intensity. We Israelis, or from time to time with the American assistance, have the ability to go on fighting indefinitely.

No matter what is achieved in Iran, in Lebanon and against the Houthis or even in Syria, it is becoming a regional conflict. I’m not sure what will happen to [Israel’s] peace with Jordan and with Egypt. It will depend how we end this adventure. I think that if we do not change our policy, we will not have normalization with Saudi Arabia, and probably, we will not be able to keep the Abraham Accords

agreement with the Emirates because on the day after, when we open our eyes, Palestinians are still here.

Q: Can you tell us what you think the goals of prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government is in the military operations against Iran?

Between 60 to 70% of the Israelis believe that Netanyahu's decisions in are influenced by his political aspirations and not by the better future that he was elected for by us. It is about his survival in his judicial case because he's on trial. And for him, it's a matter of freedom or jail.

I knew Netanyahu for many years. I was director of the Shin Bet during his first term, and the job of the director is to know about the political situation in the country. I knew about Netanyahu more than he knew about what his ministers think about him and sometimes even family members think about him because this is your this is your job. You cannot publish it, but you know it.

He was different then. He is a very intelligent person, a very sophisticated person. But, as Lord Acton said, there is a correlation between corruption and power. He's spent too many years in power—fifteen of the last sixteen years.

Q: If you had a crystal ball, what do you think it would show about the future of the conflict in Gaza?

Look, you see what I have what I have in in my hand? [Note: Ayalon holds a multi-faceted prism to the camera]. It's almost like a crystal ball. There are many perspectives, I can see about 100 aspects of the future. I'll tell you why I think it's not important.

I learned something after the October 7, 2023 attack. I was not surprised that it happened because it was in the atmosphere, you didn't have to have intelligence information. When you read about the hatred, the suffering, and the humiliation of your enemy, you understand that violence will come next. But, I didn't foresee exactly the type of violence, the level of cruelty, and lack of humanity that we saw during those two or three days.

We ask, "What happened to us, Israelis? How come we didn't see it with all of our sophisticated intelligence community?" I came to believe that as an organization, we lost the ability to dream and to predict future scenarios.

We came to believe that, "Okay, we tried everything." Robert McNamara published a great book in the 1990s, [*In Retrospect*](#). He explained that his policies led to the deaths of thousands of Americans in Vietnam. He came to say, "I knew from the very beginning that we could not win this war."

There are 11 lessons. You know what he said was the first lesson? "We did not understand our enemy."

As an intelligence officer, you know what you know, and you know what you don't know, but you don't know all of what you don't know. And as an intelligence director I should put much of my energy into pursuing the scenarios that I wish to see in five or ten years. And politically, statesmanship is taking steps to try to achieve [those scenarios]. If you ask me what was missing in Israeli policy, during the last twenty, thirty years, this is what was missing. Because when we decided sixteen years ago to manage the conflict as a policy—this is what we decided with the Palestinians—the conflict manages you. You lose the only factor that you can influence.

Q: You spent over 30 years in the Israeli Navy before rising to command it. What are can you tell us about naval combat in the modern era?

I think the importance of irregular warfare even between states when you see the achievements of Ukraine. In the beginning, even I used to think that the [invasion of Ukraine] would end in two or three months. Russia would crush Ukraine.

But, they are still fighting and it is not only because of the support of the West, Europe, and America. When you try to understand the role of what we call irregular warfare at sea such as destroying battleships, and other vessels., with small platforms, the importance of cyber, etc. it's unbelievable. The importance of irregular warfare tools used in conventional war is something that I think something that we have to study more than we are studying.

Second, the importance of mine warfare. We forgot about mine warfare after the Second World War. This became an issue during the First Gulf War. It is relevant to the Bab-al-Mandab or the to the Persian Gulf. They can also be used offensively, we could close all the harbors of the Houthis, but we didn't do it.

Globalization is something that on the political level, I don't think that we took in account. Especially when it comes to maritime environment because 80 or 90% of the of global commerce transits sea lines of communication. The prices of oil and all the goods will be shaped by how open the sea lines of communication are—especially in choke points—but everywhere.

Q: Have you had any experiences in your career, positive or negative, that changed your thinking? What did you learn from it?

I was picked as Shin Bet Director after 34 years in the military and I served for almost four-and-a-half years. The way I understand myself, my people, Israeli society, and the Middle East, is the result of this four-and-a-half years. And I when people ask me I tell them that I learned two lessons:

First, it sounds stupid, but I say “The lesson that I learned is that my enemies are not military targets. They are human beings.” When I said it to my wife, she said, “You are crazy. Of course, they are human beings.” I said, “No. You don’t understand. As a military commander, you don’t see your enemy as a human being. You see them as targets.” And she said, “What do you mean?” I said, “Look, I’m not proud of it, but in my [military] career, I killed many, but I knew nothing about them. The only question that I asked was ‘How?’ By using a knife or a Kalashnikov or a 20-millimeter or a 40-millimeter or a 76-millimeter gun, or missiles that travel from 20 kilometers or some more than 100 kilometers.

The question should have been, “Why?” But we did not ask why. Instead, we looked at “What should be the tactics, the strategy, or the system in which we kill our enemy.” But I knew nothing about them. I didn’t know their names. I didn’t know their families, their children, or with whom they pray in the mosque. I couldn’t care less. I didn’t need it [at the time].

In the Shin Bet, you learn that in order to win against your enemy, you have to know everything about them—about their past, their parents, with whom they pray in the mosque. What is the name of his children, of his wife? Who are his neighbors? To which school does he want to send his children? That tells you something about this ideology, there is a huge difference between people who want to send their children to study in school of Hamas—where they learn to believe to apply *Sharia*—or to schools of the Palestinian Authority. If you do not know then you will not win this war because, you don’t know what to ask when you interrogate him.

You have to go back to the answer that Robert McNamara gave: know your enemy. Now you understand why he’s doing it, though you don’t have to accept it. Even if you know that the moment that he will be released, he will go on killing my people, you understand why. And this is when you start to think, “Can I combine statesmanship with the power of military power?” And then you understand the concept of smart power, which is a combination of hard power and soft power.

The second lesson I learned: Hope is a security asset. The most dangerous enemy is the enemy that has nothing to lose. The whole equation of deterrence is that I can take something from you which is very important for you. And in order not to lose it, you are ready to negotiate. But if your enemy does not think that he has anything to lose, it leads to the phenomena of a suicide attack.

People tell me, "You don't understand Islam, it's something very deep in Islamic culture." I said, "No, you are totally wrong. The first suicide attack written about in human history is in the Bible. The story of Samson and Delilah. He was humiliated. He was blind. He understood that he would not survive. He said, "All what I want all what I want is to kill as many of my enemies, and this is my victory." This is a totally different definition of victory.

You have to understand that the attack on the October 7 was the result of many people who knew that they are going to die, but they said, "Okay. At least, we shall kill many of our enemies." And this was a phenomenon of Samson and Delilah.

This was also the story of our heroes, the Jews who came from the tunnels in order to fight the Nazis in the Warsaw uprising. They knew that they would be killed, but they wanted to choose the way they would die. "At least we shall kill as many Germans as possible." This is the second lesson: Unless we are able to create a sense of hope, we will not win this war.

Q: You led the Israeli Navy and spend most of your career there. Can you tell us how it fits into the current conflicts and Israeli security overall?

The Israeli Navy, should be built to face three types of war. First, to conduct a second strike. The only way in order to make sure that even if your enemy has the capability to destroy your country, you can deter it. The only way to do this is undersea, I'm not discussing it further. Because even if Iran loses its dreams of nuclear capability, we are in the Middle East. We saw [nuclear proliferation] attempts in Iraq; we saw it in Syria in the past. We saw it in Libya. So, this is something that the navy should be able to deter every future enemy who really believes that he will be able to erase us from the earth.

The second is what we call the conventional war. The Israeli Navy fought a conventional war during the Yom Kippur War. It was it was one of the of the most impressive conventional victories ever achieved. It was the first time when missile boats, missile ships from both sides met. And, after three or four days, the enemy did not have the courage to leave their harbors. We destroyed and we sunk all the missile ships of the enemy, and they did not hit any of ours. Of course, modern conventional naval warfare, is very different from the 1973 war. But, the navy could play a major role in the Mediterranean, in the Red Sea, and in the Indian Ocean or Persian Gulf. The state of Israel fits the geostrategic definition is an island. Nothing comes to Israel from our neighbors. Ninety-eight percent of all our goods come from the sea. So, maintaining the sea lines of communication is essential.

The third type is commando operations which is how we have largely fought against, and Iran, all the all the weapons that Hezbollah used that came from Iran through the Red Sea and the Mediterranean around Africa. And finally, I don't want to speak about too much now, but the

capabilities of our naval commandos to operate everywhere, not only close to the coastline of Israel. Israel's naval forces had major success preventing or stopping the flow of weapon systems to our enemies in the shadows.

Q: You went to the Naval War College. Is there anything about the Israeli Navy from a larger strategic perspective that would be a surprise to Americans?

I was born in the Jordan Valley. And all my childhood, you know, Syrians were up above on the Golan Heights. We would spend days in shelters because Syrians used to shell and bomb our villages, our kibbutzim. So, the concept of a border is something very clear to us. There is a specific geographic line, on one side are the good guys and on the other side are the bad guys. And this is something that is difficult to explain to an American. You have Canada, and probably [some tension] today with immigration through Mexico, but it's different from the way we understand the concept of a border.

At the war college I learned the importance of the sea lines of communication and sea dominance. It was the first time when I read Mahan. And until then, I didn't understand how small the Israeli Navy was. Growing up, people would ask me, "Why do you want to join the navy?" I said, "I was born on the shore of the sea." And they were laughing because it's the Lake of Galilee. I came to realize it was a lake and then learned about the Mediterranean. But only when I came to the Naval War College, did I comprehend the global aspect of the navy. We know about geography, but Israelis do not understand the magnitude of the ocean and the size of the U.S. Navy. I was proud of our naval victory in the Yom Kippur War. But only after the war college did I understand that with all the respect to our achievement, it's a coastal navy.

The views expressed in this interview do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

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