

An Update on the Situation in Israel with BICOM CEO Richard Pater | 05.26.21

- Welcome back everybody. I'm delighted to also welcome back Richard Pater, our friend from Viacom who will be in discussion with Carly about Israel and the broader region. So Richard, thank you very much. Welcome back. It's great to see you, and we are looking forward to your presentation. Thanks, over to you.

- Thank you Wendy. So Richard, I think we've got an awful lot to cover in the next hour. So we're going to see how much of Israel and the broader region we can run through. I obviously want to start off with reflecting on the last two weeks and what the IDF termed Operation Guardian of the Walls. Now, 12 days at the end of the ceasefire, just after I left Israel and returned to the reign of London, Hamas and the IDF agreed to ceasefire.

Now, there's been a lot of coverage around that, so I don't want to focus particularly on the ceasefire itself. But why do you think the U.S. administration, this time around, was able to help get a ceasefire in 12 days versus, say, 2014 when it took closer to six weeks? And additionally, you know, do you think this has led to the U.S. kind of being back involved in the Middle East, or are they still trying to sidestep their way to domestic issues?

- Okay, first of all, thank you very much indeed for having me again. Before I answer the question directly, I think it's worth just doing a very quick overview of what was achieved and kind of the dynamic, at least from a military perspective, of what happened through the 12 days, of why in fact it lasted 12 days. The IDF are broadly satisfied with their campaign. Obviously there was little appetite to go in with ground forces because of the inherent risks involved to both sides in the extent that it would expand the injuries and fatalities. So they kept an air campaign, 1,500 targets across the Gaza Strip.

And so in relative terms, and although every civilian life is a tragedy when it's taken, the relative bombardment relative to the casualties was a very impressive campaign in the sense that they took out so much of the underground network. And I think the underground network is important just to think about. Because through the seven years of relative quiet since the summer of '14, the Hamas was clearly focused on their investments in that tunnel as opposed to the issues of where building up an infrastructure and other things of where the cement could go to. And I mentioned that in context of the ceasefire, 'cause to compare it between 2014 and this time is very important.

If we're going to be crude about it, it now seems with hindsight, one of the main reasons why 2014 lasted so long was the failed diplomacy of John Kerry at the time that used a convoluted system through both Qatar and and Egypt, where the messages were diluted and misunderstood. And there were seven misplaced ceasefires before they reached it. This time, the Americans acted much more prudently and sensibly. They brought Sissi in from the cold who had been ignored for the first four months of the Biden presidency and understood that the Egyptian role as opposed to 2014 Sissi has now strengthened his control. The security

corporation with Israel is probably at an all time high. That's not to say there are any, I've got nothing good to say unfortunately about civil society relations. But on a security front and to intelligent services, Israeli Egypt is in a very good place. And so Israel felt the automatic trust and approval of allowing Egypt to mediate. The US gave Israel crucial diplomatic cover, especially at the UN and amongst in and I think in other international forums as well.

And that quiet role of diplomacy whilst allowing the Egyptians who have the traction with both sides, that was really how they were able to bring this situation to a close relatively quickly. And again comes to emphasise that the IDF continued up until operationally they gave a signal that there was probably no more, not that they'd probably ran out to the bank of targets, but they significantly destroyed the capacity of manufacturing and reproduction of these rockets. Although they still have a very healthy warehouses full of tens of thousands of rockets remain. They significantly limited their capacity and so it was an appropriate time to call it quits with that within that mediation terms.

- So obviously the IDF is positioning themselves as satisfied with the operation, but actually so is Hamas and you know, has had a number of jubilant celebrations in the streets that the civilian casualties in Gaza are obviously incredibly tragic, but Hamas is still saying that from their side you know, they also view this as a win, not just you know, militarily, but also for what they feel they they stirred up in Israeli society. So can you touch on under what guides Hamas is able to claim this as a win?

- Absolutely. Listen, I mean this is the nature when, there is the nature of modern warfare is when there's no knockout blow and the defeated side gets to rear its head. And almost as it did today, Ismail Haniyeh, the political leader of Hamas was able to brag and to provoke and to directly speak to Benny Gantz calling him out saying I'm leaving my house now, you can hit hit me if you dare. And of course, you know, there's a cease by now, there's not going to be no strike. But they're able to have that image victory of those parades. And I think militarily, this was the first time they launched these multi-barrel rocket launchers. The barrage that they hit to Tel Aviv was substantial ditto to the symbolic fire to Jerusalem where I had to take my own family to the shelter, which is obviously a very unusual event in Jerusalem.

But I think, but that as you mentioned as well, that the way that they were able to galvanise and very cleverly use the tension around Jerusalem to ignite both the Israeli Arab republic, potentially the Jerusalemites, and the West Bank as well, is a very worrying trend, which we, I'm sure we can discuss more of how much Hamas have that that impact. But I think again, in the world of imagery, then they've certainly succeeded to raise themselves out of what was irrelevant. I mean the Muslim brotherhood as a movement was in serial decline for the last few years. And suddenly they're able to galvanise attentions and to demand an agenda place here.

- Now we've had some interesting sound bites come out post the cease-fire both from Anera and from the founder of Hamas who was interviewed on on Sky News. And I say they're unusual because you know, normally after the conflict, the Israelis feel that, you know, that the

role of the UN in perhaps not calling out Hamas for their role and being clear, you know, on the damage is often they feel unfair.

Now, the founder of Anera was interviewed this week where he acknowledged the precision of the Israeli campaign, you know, the the minimal number of civilian casualties and you know, how he felt actually the Kerem Shalom crossing staying open and all of those important factors meant that you know, the situation didn't spiral into one that it could have become. Additionally the founder of Hamas commenting you know, on Sky News that yes, as far as he was concerned, Israel doesn't have a right to exist and didn't do a good job of denying they were firing from civilian property. You know, how do those two interviews shake out? Is the head of Anera going to stay as the head of Anera in Gaza and you know, able to make these kind of statements? Or do you think this was a good opportunity for the world to get a glimpse of some of the reality?

- Well, I think certainly the latter and obviously you know, these things, it's a shame some of these voices don't come out and aren't exposed in real time. But good that they've come out at all. I think that the onerous comments are particularly welcome and significant. I mean I wouldn't kind of expand and kind of suggest overplay and suggest that they have that much long-term significance. Although what is interesting will be the role that by coming out and kind of bringing out some public trust within Israel and have some of Israel allies, it allows Anera in particular and the UN more generally to be the vehicle, the mechanism to allow some of that aid that desperately needed, humanitarian aid and supplies to enter into Gaza. That's always been kind of the trick that's been stuck here to find a mechanism on the ground that will allow and facilitate the appropriate rehabilitation. And we can go into that in more detail if you're interested or move on.

- Thank you Richard. I'm going to flag that we've got listeners from all over the world and whilst your and my British accent works well, just speak a little slower for some of our audiences who may be needing to catch up on your dulcet tones. So one of the other things that obviously is going to going to be asked is post 2014, you know, Hamas was able to stockpile weapons. You know, you mentioned you spent some time in your shelter in Jerusalem. I spent a lot of time in the shelter in Tel Aviv. So you know, the deterrent post 2014 didn't stop Hamas stop piling more weapons and the blockade didn't stop them getting them in. What's the Israeli intel and opinion on how they are continually able to refuel their supply.

- So I think the Egyptians have actually done, we thought a pretty good job at limiting the smuggling of the tunnels. There were assessments that suggested about a thousand tunnels under that thin slip of less than 10 kilometres what Israel used to call the Philadelphi corridor from a Rafah in the sea to Kerem Shalom on the three-way border is kind of described as Swiss cheese. Now, I think the other said the Egyptians have done a pretty good job at at blocking most of them, but I don't think they sealed it hermetically. So there are still some small supplies that have come through, but more significantly seems to be the ability of taking technology from Iran and being able to have technicians kind of either learn like this over Zoom or kind of being

sent files over kind of by electronic means to be able to enable the blueprint and to learn the technology in order to manufacture these rockets inside Gaza. So the technology gap is already been, has been an issue.

If you notice there was a large, it was a high priority of the IDF targeted of some of the commanders that were involved in the manufacturing process. So it's hoped at least from the IDF perspective, that they did target the specific technological know-how, which perhaps isn't being passed on as well as those factories themselves. There is still obviously more that can be done. And even Hamas this evening were bragging. Amongst the bragging they said they weren't going to take any of the money that the international community gave. It was going to donate to rehabilitate the Gaza strip. They alluded to the fact that they have their own source of funding. The military wing, Izz al-Din al-Qassam that are primarily from Iran and from perhaps other places in the Arab world as well. So they don't need to rely on the donations from the other countries.

- Thank you. So after the cease-fire, there's been announcements by the Americans and the international community that they are going to look to support the rebuild of Gaza without enabling Hamas, which might sound like an oxymoron. So how do you think the international community are hoping to do that and, and who is it? Who can help us? And I'm going to push you one more time to speak twice as slowly as you were.

- I thought I was doing a better job at speaking slowly. I'll try and continue in this fashion.

- Thank you.

- So I think you're absolutely right. This is kind of the tricky, the trickiest way to unpack this issue, both two past 2014 and as we speak today of how do you enable the rehabilitation of Gaza without empowering Hamas further, This is the bottom line. The international community, EU, the other countries have felt no compunction to send a real meaningful presence on the ground. The question remains whether the Egyptians on this time, because as I mentioned, the role that Sissi is playing and the role that Sissi could perceive himself as playing the power game of the Arab world and impose a solution there as well. And what the Americans seem to be suggesting at the moment is that it's going to be a combination of organisations including the Egyptians, including the Palestinian authority, including the UN and including Israel, and that they will find, if it's all of their responsibilities and they find a mechanism to have the UN people, Palestinian PA, it's very difficult to get the PA back on the ground. It's been tried several times. So it's not yet completely thought out.

From the American perspective when they say they want the PA involvement exactly what that looks like. We've seen them in the past been trying to place back on the borders and to be able to be a check there. Again, that met with a lot of friction from the Hamas leadership. So it's really not clear how they can do this, but there is a hope that they can find a way. And I'll just remind you, one of the biggest issues is the issue of dual usage goods. And this, the dual usage is

something that could have a military use, or it could have a civilian use. And the classic example is cement. That if what we've learned after the last seven years that all the cement that was meant to go into Gaza to rebuild Gaza from summer 14, was diverted and used by Hamas to build tunnels and their huge network, and again, this evening as Sinwar bragged, that they had 500 kilometres worth of tunnels.

Now, I mean we can take his numbers at face value or dismiss them, but according to Sinwar, they had 500 kilometres of underground network. We're talking 35, 40 metres underground. And the IDF managed to destroy 5%. Obviously the IDF claim they destroyed over a hundred kilometres of it and they haven't said how big they actually think it is, but either way, we are dealing with an enormous amount of concrete which has been diverted from civilian goods usage instead of building homes and hospitals and universities, it went underground. So how do you prevent it happening this time? And by the way, they had quite a sophisticated mechanism last time.

I've been on the border down on the Gaza strip. I met with the commander of the Gaza Strip that had explained the mechanism last time round that said that every individual building contractor needed to present their plans, the scale of their building, and the exact measurement of cement that they would need for that building and that what they received. And so the IDF at the time were satisfied there was a mechanism in place that allowed them this dual usage material in on condition that it would go to rebuilding homes. Now, clearly that mechanism didn't work, so they need to find a more adequate and a appropriate and reliable mechanism to prevent that Hamas doing that again.

- So we've obviously got outside forces who are supporting Hamas' ability to re-arm itself, you know, Iran and its role in this. But also there was a tried and tested route for Hamas that used to go through Sudan. How much have the improvements in relations in that part of the world through the Abraham Accords offered a potential opportunity for Israel to harm Hamas' ability to re-arm? Or is Iran going to continue to find new and ingenious ways to support its ally?

- So you are absolutely right that one of the key benefits of Israel signing a treaty with Sudan was part of the process of the pivot of Sudan away from the Iranian axis and back into the world of what we would think of the more, the enlightened world, let's put it that way. Obviously part of this was at the time US President Trump's inducement to remove them completely from the terrorist sponsorship list, which obviously then it was in the national interest. But there's no doubt, as you said in previous rounds going back 2008, 2009, the IDF, the Air Force carried out an audacious raid on a port in Sudan, which was a weapon depot for Iran smuggling into up north, into into Gaza.

And the reason why they hit the site in Sudan was because of the sensitivity of the relationship then and now with Egypt that Israel wouldn't dare strike on sovereign Egyptian soil. So the last moment before it entered Egyptian territory was Sudan and that's why it was at the calculated risk to strike there. That was over a decade ago. And there were probably lots more instances in

that time, the time elapsed of Sudan being used in that way. Now that they are brought into, as I said, kind of the family of nations, then that's taken that card away from Iran. But you're also right in suggesting that Iran will find other means as well. They have the capacity to send boats directly through there to find ways to stop in somewhere in the Sinai, which is still partly ungoverned despite the Egyptian investment to improve their counterterrorism capacity within the Sinai Peninsula. It's not hermetically sealed. There are still, and stuff still gets through.

It's also possible by the way, that even there Israel has a naval blockade on the Mediterranean sea. That again, it's not impossible that things have been able to get through that way as well. And one final idea being discussed here by some analysts is the idea that because of the devastation that Hamas militarily took a took this time round that they are going to now re-explore opening up their what used to be their base prior to 2011 in Damascus. If you remember at the start of the Syrian civil War, because of the Shiite support and the loss of life of the Syrian Muslims, Hamas felt it was no longer appropriate to use Assad as a benefactor.

And so pulled themselves out, went over to instead and to Jordan and to Lebanon in places, but basically left the Syrian theatre. And now kind of as Assad has reestablished himself, we'll see just how well he does in the elections that are being held today in Syria. But regardless, the Hamas military capacity is considering reopening their Damascus or even further down south on somewhere on the Syrian Golan and reestablishing a military presence there as well. That's obviously, is just talk and speculation at the moment, but something that we should monitor very carefully going forward.

- I think we could guess now how the Syrian elections are going to go. But we won't dwell on that. So Jonathan Powell, who was Tony Blair's chief of staff and you know, responsible for working to bring about the peace agreement with Northern Ireland has long been a proponent of western government sitting down with ISIS, with Al-Qaeda and you know, doing his version of what he did with the IRA. Now, every so often there's this voice put forwards in Israel, you know, which is can Hamas be you know, repositioned into some kind of responsible government. I know that post the pullout from Gaza, there was these hopes that you know, perhaps putting Hamas, once Hamas was in power, they might behave more responsibly. Have any of those voices reappeared and do you see any potential that there is a change to this paradigm or the engagement will continue to be through the PA?

- Well, I think first of all, my assessment is that the Hamas leadership in Gaza are split, they're split amongst those that think that they have, that only by taking the fight to Israel is their raise on Detra and that should be the absolute primary focus. And there is a second camp that says they think they have a responsibility to their own people to actually work and provide a better living standard and a socioeconomic future for their people. And so that's, and then there's a third split of the Hamas leadership, which which is outside, which hasn't been allowed back into Gaza, by the way, because of Sissi. And because it was a punishment for going back and breaking their promise that they would've visit Tehran last year.

So they're stuck outside and they're sniping from the outside and they have other leadership in Lebanon as well. So the Hamas leadership is divided and proliferated. Having said that, even within the pragmatic school, there are some who are reevaluating and assessing, maybe they don't need the Egyptian mediation and maybe they could be direct contact with Israelis. This is very new again, just like I mentioned on the the military plans are not yet fully developed and fully cooked. I don't think this idea either is fully developed and whether it will really have at the end of the day, have enough traction or Ghana support amongst the critical leadership. But there is a divide about not going for a long term cease-fire, reconciling and improving the lot of the population or taking a far more rigorous and militant line that they've maintained until now.

- So you know, one of the reasons you could say Israel is sceptical about this rebuilding of Gaza onto international supervision is if it looks to its northern border of Lebanon, where you know, the UN always seemed to be the last to know that somebody's fired rockets from Lebanon. And my old boss, Ron Prosser, could give us a half an hour lecture on the lack of action of that force. Now, we saw you know, I think four or five rockets on a couple of different days from Lebanon, but the Israelis were quick to say those were Palestinian factions versus Hezbollah. How has the northern border been over the last week? And additionally we saw Nasrallah of Hezbollah appear yesterday on TV. You know, the gossip in Israel is he had a cough and didn't look well, I presume they're hoping he's caught covid, but you know, how are people viewing Hezbollah in light of the last two weeks?

- So I think in the short answer is that the deterrence has been maintained, but that didn't stop them having the boldness to allow, as you correctly say, the Palestinian factions to fire rockets on at least two occasions. I think there was a third incident on the Syrian side of the Golan that may have been a similar idea of Palestinian factions. The working assumption on the Israeli side is that such as the level of control by Hezbollah in the southern Lebanon, that there's no way they would've dared to have done it without the approval of Hezbollah. But having the approval of Hezbollah and Hezbollah find themselves is another large jump. So we've got to be careful, we've got to be cautious.

I'll just, there were two other incidents as well in the last week or two on the Lebanese border. One was kind of we've seen before about people protesting near the fence and kind of using it as a rallying point, again probably with the support of Hezbollah that are behind the scenes. But a more disturbing incident was on one occasion when they actually burst through, climbed over the fence and very briefly entered into Israeli territory. So these are significant and rarer instances that one needs to learn the lessons of, but as I said, bottom line, Hezbollah seem to be deterred, but they are kind of growing in in their confidence.

And as you mentioned, yes, I mean I always, I've heard on numerous occasions, Israeli intelligence officers take the words of Nasrallah very seriously. They will calibrate every term that he uses and kind of analyse it to the end. And you're right that the fact that he appeared with a cough, some even described him as choking at one point, and apparently his son during the broadcast tweeted to say that it's allergies. So the fact that the son felt the need-

- That's like when Russians say it's food poisoning, right. It's the similar kind of you know.

- Well go figure. Exactly. We can only add a conjecture why it was important for him to make that speech. Now obviously the context of the speech was also celebrating the Israeli withdrawal back in 2000, the 21st anniversary of kind of that one victory that they like to celebrate and mark. And so they very much chimed in. And again, if you saw the text of Nasrallah what he said last night was very much connect both to the Hamas victory and also resonate around the issues of Jerusalem. So it's clear there is a theme here and that this connectivity should be of great concern to anyone that cares about Israel.

- So let's turn to another ally of Hezbollah, back to Iran. You know, on the side of everything that's been going on, obviously the powers that have been meeting around the resuscitation of the Iranian negotiations and the potential to either, you know, return to the JCPA or the POA or putting new sanctions in place. And additionally Iran, you know, keeps moving around between taking a hard line position and today extending another month for the cameras to watch their activities. So how is Israel reading these engagements with Iran and how much do you think that played into the recent Hamas operation?

- Just answered just on the last point. I don't, I wouldn't make the necessary connection between that. I think they're in parallel and they're happening kind of independently of each other. Listen, there's no doubt that Israel is looking what to the increasing confidence of the Iranian regime with regard to the enrichment of the uranium in particular and other violations of the accord with great concern. It's also no secret that Israel is at odds with the Israel's greatest ally, the US, but listening to the Secretary of State, Blinken yesterday and the shared press conference he did with Netanyahu, it was incredibly revealing because Blinken will say at every opportunity, repeat the talking point first and foremost that Israel and the US share the same agenda to not allow Iran to have even a single nuclear bomb that seems a shared a clear agenda.

And I'm sure most of Europe, or I hope all of Europe would sign off on that as well, but that's where the commonality ends because the US are convinced that the best way to do it is still to bring Iran back into fold to reverse what President Trump did and to bring them back in. And the US have have explicitly said that they would kind of rejoin if they would as well. And they're still kind of fighting, I think over the technicalities of the Iranians pushing for some form of compensation and other kind of loosening the idea that for example, a slightly more advanced centrifuge, the IR-4 that has now been kind of in the research stage, can also now be put online.

So the Iranians are pushing on this is just one example on a whole range of the details to squeeze the US and the fact again from the Israeli perspective, that the US have acquiesced to this process of remote negotiations. They sit in different hotels in Vienna and the E3 shuttled between them relaying the messages kind of at the Iranian behest has at least the optics from here that Iran is kind of is running this show, that they're not feeling any pressure and that they

are the ones calling the shots. And it will be up to the Iranian to decide whether they decide to go back in, if it's in their interest or if they will go for the breakout, which can take us to a very dangerous place. So this is the game. And obviously overlaying on that is also the Iranian, the Iranian elections which are coming up, which again, most Western analysts are suggesting that even though the whole list is being primed by the Ayatollah. but whoever takes over will be probably more conservative, less pragmatic than Khomeini.

And so the question again now in the last week, I mean my personal view is I can't see it happening and them tying up the deal in the next three or four weeks. Of course you know, it's not impossible we could wake up to earth shattering news tomorrow because with the inside scoop on the deliberations inside the room is less, we have less access to it, but at least the noises coming out America don't suggest any imminent breakthrough. And so Israel will continue to watch this and monitor this very carefully. We heard of another explosion somewhere in southern Iran. We can only speculate whether these work accidents have been inspired by anyone that we may know. And that's an open question on this one. I haven't seen any yet any evidence or any any issues. But we know in the past that both the issues against prominent scientists and against certain nuclear compounds have clearly been targeted by some very sophisticated force that has a very strong agenda to prevent Iran from developing this.

- So if we talk about Iran, but turn to the Israeli domestic political scene, you know, Iran often comes up as an an agenda item in terms of who's able to keep Israel safe and who do Israelis want as their prime minister. We were seconds away, perhaps pre the recent operation from a unity change coalition, which started to fall apart you know, sort of day three or four of the operation. As Naftali Bennett seemed to lose his party and his six seats. It was interesting enough that he had the potential to become Prime Minister with six or seven seats, but him by himself that was going to be an impressive one to pull off. As is always the case with Israeli politics, there's never a dull moment. So you know, post operation, the machinations have continued and today Lapid signed both with Barak Meretz and Lieberman, but then Ayelet Shaked hold her own press conference tonight. So can you give us a kind of couple of minute update on where we find ourselves and what the next two or three weeks brings as we look ahead?

- Well, I can't tell you two or three weeks because that's too long in Israeli politics. I can tell you the process that we are leading up to next Wednesday, the 2nd of June, that's when Lapid's mandate formally comes to an end. And what Lapid is trying to do is pick up the pieces of what happened two weeks ago and try and present a government of change. So as you correctly say, he is in the process of building up on kind of his most secure and loyal and reliable partners, Lieberman, who he's given the finance portfolio to, and now closing a deal with the left wing Meretz party. And we're expected that the Labour Party and Gantz will soon join as well. And they've all got their own portfolios laid out. And this plan is basically meant to present to get to reach the weekend with about 45 people of the centre left kind of backing this coalition and then put the pressure on Gideon Sa'ar, on Naftali Bennett, and Ayelet Shaked to kind of to come

forward and to close this deal. And the idea then that if all those parties come through, then they would have the late fifties, and I'm being deliberately vague on the numbers, but they would have late fifties and then be able to still use the Ra'am, the Islamic party as a blocking majority from the outside.

That's a working theory and there are plenty of problems as also you correctly mentioned Naftali Bennett dropped the idea when he realised, he turned around and realised he doesn't have his party behind him at all. And that, so if you're a seven party faction and you're about to become Prime Minister, exact as you said six, he lost a guy, Chikli, he's gone off, they're left with six. Now, the one theory is that now the fighting is over, that six is a little bit more solid or at least there's a four or a five that he can bank on and it may come down to these numbers. So when Ayelet Shaked breaks her silence after a month and calls a press conference and calls and it's not for a reason that she is now trying to break up the religious Zionist faction.

And if you remember that there are the religious Zionist, a technical block of three parties, the Bezalel Yoel Smotrich's National Union Party, the Ben-Gvir's Jewish Power Party, and the Noam Party, which is a single faction. And so the idea is just amongst those kind of hardline, racist, neo Kahanes, you could peel off two or three of the slightly more palatable mainstream ones. And this is kind of all relative and I'll point the comments by the way of Smotrich who is kind of the guy that is going to come under the most pressure to join this government. And maybe I should give a spoiler and say this is not going to happen. There is no way that he would sit with a left wing government. He's enjoying making every side sweat and kind of play the game so they could him. But they tried the same game exactly that to build the government off the back of an Islamic party, which they said listen, and there's nothing to talk about here.

There's no game, but to its credit and it's very rare to give Smotrich any credit when it came to calling out the Jewish violence and the terrorism inside Israel, Smotrich was on message and appropriately came out with the appropriate condemnation of those Jews that were responsible for that terrible violence in Bat Yam and elsewhere. So that's kind of the nicest thing I can say. And the slither of lining that maybe Lapid presents a package and puts that pressure. Maybe, maybe, maybe come Tuesday night, we'll hear some dramatic announcement that Bennett has decided to go with it. If not the connect set then receives the mandate for another 21 days and we can gain that out as well if you'd like to or we can talk about that another time.

- I mean, I could ask you to game it out, but I think at this point in Israeli politics as usual, there's still everything to play for, but I wanted to talk about the what some people are describing as the kind of breakdown of the 20 year coexistence project that has been being built across mixed cities and towns in Israel. You know, Ben-Gvir, who you've touched on, cannot claim the same credit as having come out with the right noises. And you know, as someone who has you know, I've been spending a lot of the last 10 years in Israel, you know, it actually, to me that was the tragedy of the last two weeks. And whilst the Hamas rockets were truly you know, horrifying and the civilian losses on both sides, the the breakdown of parts of the fabric of Israeli society started to feel very real. You know, and people who who have spent 20 years living in a mixed

village would say to you on both sides that they were very nervous to leave their houses. So, you know, how much has insurmountable damage been done and how much you know, are we able to kind of from the embers rebuild? And what do you think this says about the nature of Israeli society?

- Well, I share your concerns. First of all, I agree that it was a shocking wake up call to see those images and to see the extent of that animosity amongst kind of the Israeli population that we'd hoped despite all the problems and the imperfections that the trajectory up until that point was positive. And I think that's the key to pick up on that positive momentum that we had. Bear in mind, you know, thanks to Netanyahu, he legitimised Israeli Arab politicians for the first time after a year of kind of running a year ago, running a campaign to debate them totally in delegitimized. It was Netanyahu for pure political expediency, decided to reach out and to engage and to use kind of the realism being aired from the Ra'am party to bring them in.

And now from that great high of the potential of Ra'am sitting in a government either with Netanyahu or with a block of change, we then fall to this low of these clashes intercommunally. I very much hope that whoever is forms the next government understands the need to invest long term in the infrastructure projects, especially with the young males of the community that need to see a future and a shared future in this country. And that the holy work that organisations do that invest in education and coexistence projects need to be supported more than ever. And that you know, after the period of a terror attack, you judge these things by hours and then days of kind of how long it takes a wound to heal. And so this is the same in a similar sense, that it's going to take days, weeks, and months for it to heal, to build that trust up again. And we only hope that the sides can stay talking.

I'll share with you just a personal story. Last night I met with a friend of mine, a Muslim from East Jerusalem, and we went out, we met at a neutral venue and went for a walk together to discuss openly kind of what both communities had experienced over the last two weeks. And there's no doubt that what he described in his neighbourhood was horrific. And my heart went out to him. And I can only say to him, as I say to you as well, that it's those interactions and dialogue, which seems so trivial, but I put kind of further more important emphasis on them that it's just so important for the other side to hear. Likewise, I was able to explain to him Israeli perspectives that he had not been exposed to living 15 kilometres up the road, even less, that we're living in parallel lives. And that as much as we can do to build bridges, to rebuild connections, trust and faith, that's all we can really do.

- So I wanted to touch on someone who's been perhaps a ghost for the last few weeks, but you know, had a role to play in all of this, which is Mahmoud Abbas who you know, although we all laughed a little when one of the American early calls was to Mahmoud Abbas during the operation to you know, encourage him to instal calm, you know, the elections within the Palestinian authority were cancelled for what I think was the fourth time in about 15 years. And you know, that tension has also spilled out within Palestinian society. You know, you have seen genuine violent infighting again between Fatah and members of Hamas. And you know, one of

the imams, Alexa was chased out for not being pro Hamas enough. So, you know, what is the situation within Palestinian society and how problematic for them is the lack of elections?

- So I definitely share the analysis that the one of the biggest triggers to this round of violence was a result of that inter Palestinian clash. The fact that the elections were called that Fatah itself is so divided, and that then the raising expectations that Hamas thought they could gain some political foothold in the West Bank only to have the rug pulled out from underneath them and denied that opportunity acted as a catalyst for the understanding. When I described those two factions within the Hamas ideology competing was able to the military hard line able to win out and decide that now is the time to fire rockets. So it's not a surprise that society remains this fragmented and with a very difficult and problematic leadership in Abbas.

However, and I think this is also an important point to emphasise, that despite all the rocket fire and despite what we saw in the Israeli Arab communities, there was clearly not a desire amongst mainstream Palestinians of the West Bank to launch a third intifada into Fatah. We saw two or three sporadic incidents of live gunfire at Israeli forces. And if you remember, a week before the conflict started in Gaza, there was a drive-by shooting in which an Israeli 19 year old student was waiting at a bus stop in the West Bank and he was shot in a drive-by shooting and killed. But apart from that, there have been no other Israeli fatalities in the West Bank at all.

So when you see the frustration and the rioting in places like Nablus, it's deliberate that they're shooting up in the air that they're chancing, but they're not going out to the checkpoint and engaging militarily with the IDF, which they could do. They have, there is not enough weapons and light arms within the Palestinian society amongst again, not just I mean the Hamas, the Hamas is there, although keeping a lower profile, but of more concern is the Tanzim, which is the Fatah armed military wing. And again, too like it, so far that hasn't happened and that didn't happen over the last two weeks. And so that's an important point.

Now just on a political level, Fatah also completely divided ideologically conceptually of what they want to do. And it's not about peace with Israel, unfortunately, that's not on anyone's agenda on their side, but they are very close. There were factions within Fatah that were very close to reaching reconciliation with Hamas. Now, it's been talked about again, the idea of a technocrat government that kind of again, would facilitate the other things that we've discussed, the mechanism of the UN and Israel, et cetera, to help bring aid. So all of this is connected if they can bring a technocrat government, and there is a separate wing in Fatah that just says you can never trust Hamas.

Hamas, don't forget what they did to us in 2005 and when they were, so sorry 2006 seven when they were overthrown in Gaza and that Hamas are their enemies. And so that there is a lack of faith internally within the Fatah leadership. And a final point that you've probably noticed as well is that the elite leadership is also fragmented. One of the main reasons why they called off the elections was because of the splits within Fatah itself that the kibbutz. Arafat's nephew has formally left the party. You've got the figure of Mohammed Dahlan kind of looming large over all

of this, who's presenting yet another kind of different nuanced perspective if he was ever to take over. And again, I'll reinforce none of this is good for Israel, by the way, because none of them are adopting anything remotely like a reconciliatory approach to Israel. But this is where we are. These are her neighbours, this is what they're thinking.

- So as we're both Brits, we will focus on the fact that the UK foreign secretary is in Israel and Dominic Raab comes with actually a more unique experience than others. You know, he lived on a kibbutz for a number of months. He interned at a Palestinian university along with a professor and was responsible for legal affairs you know, between Israel and the Palestinians. So he actually does come with at least an understanding of where the situation is on the map. But the UK whilst it was very supportive of Israel, didn't take the line that some of the Eastern European governments did of the German foreign minister of kind of coming during or the second the conflict was over. So what do you think is top on the agenda of the UK Foreign Secretary and what does his trip now mean?

- Listen, you're right, we have a British bias. My organisation is kind of built to enhance British Israel relations. So I'll caution my audience that I have that inbuilt prejudice. So it's very easy for me to say just how important and significant this British visit is. I think if a little bit more modesty and realism says that the British foreign minister's visit is exactly that. It's in line in sequencing with the visits of Blinken, of the Germans and the other central Europeans who were here on the last day. But it's also kind of in the Israeli kind of terminology, come under the stretcher to show that in a post Brexit world, the UK still has important standing on the diplomatic front, that they have some weight to give behind the idea of trying to encourage some form of progress.

Do I think that the UK can kind of, can lead this effort and would I be banking on Raab with all his, as you say, his credibility and experience. And by the way, when Israelis look at Raab they see a human rights lawyer that is not necessarily so well disposed to him relative to let's say, other British ministers who have kind of proven their worth and their loyalty far more, I think than Raab on a personal level. But I think it's, I think it's about a consistency of being seen to be here and kind of in the issue of the day for the UK to put their mark down on this conflict. I was just remembering that in 2009, you know, this is the fourth kind of overall campaign that Israel has named with regard to, with Hamas.

After the first one on the last day of the war, six European leaders, Gordon Brown representing the UK, I mean the Angela Merkel, Berlusconi, and Sarkozy, the Spanish Prime Minister, and the Czech Prime minister, who was head of the European Council at the time, all six of them. I was there actually in the courtyard of the Prime Minister's residence that night as the six of them, along with Prime Minister Olmert took the stage and came out with a joint statement again from us. Now, if you think that was kind of an incredible moment of Europe, of Israel power and alliances and Europeans. So maybe we've fallen slightly down there that you can't see six European prime ministers rushing to Israel today. Nevertheless, the foreign ministers still came in a drip drip approach. And so as we say, hoorah. That's not too bad, not too shabby, relatively speaking.

- Perhaps that's more about the relations between the European countries and their ability to coordinate nowadays than it does about Israel's power. But let's return to Blinken's trip. And you know, the fact that initially when pushed it was fairly clear this US administration did not want to put the Middle East front and centre, and they have more than enough to be dealing with domestically. And yet, you know, quietly they did make this a priority. The US has also announced a reopening of their consulate today. How has the Israelis reacted to that announcement? And you know, I guess at some point it was expected, but what's the thoughts on the ground?

- What's the saying? Just when they thought I was out, they pull me back in. I think that's, that kind of typified the American response. This is the last thing that they wanted to proactively lead and generate interest, but now they find them themselves here back again, and so that they're going to try and learn the lesson from the past. I think that what we spoke about earlier about learning the lessons of John Kerry's mistakes holds that they understand, especially for a democratic president, needs to engage in very careful and smart thought out diplomacy. And this looks to be what they're doing. And by the way, even on the Iran issue, the big difference between the Obama administration and this one is that they've made it very clear that they will continue to share private intelligence and private assessments with Israel, unlike Obama that had this private secret track of negotiations, the Biden administration is going to be far more sharing and cooperative and collegial with the Israelis.

Now, maybe having said that, the issue of the council is going to be the first, not the first, but another challenge for those relationships because Israel rejects and has stated so that they are against a US council being based in Jerusalem to serve the Palestinians. And according to the US own policy, they don't go into the West Bank for a presence. So you've got a problem here. Blinken chose his words very carefully last night saying they expressed duration to open the council again, but said you know, we're not putting a deadline on it, so therefore it needs to be part needs to be finessed still.

It needs to be understood with Israel that this is a serious objection from Israel if they do it anyway on what other arenas can they compensate the Israelis perhaps for it, or are they looking for this enough opportunity if Israel does something else that they don't like. Biden also spoke about both sides against any unilateral measures and mentioned things like expulsions and demolitions and expanding settlement growth as well, as well as on the Palestinian side incitement issue and the paid display. So the Americans have got a kind of a list of problems and red lines that they have for both sides. We'll see how long they stay in the game, kind of really engaged in this. And that's kind of as you say, kind of amongst everything else that they were hoping to prioritise.

- And one other thing that Blinken did as our last kind of moment together was invite President Rivlin in his last few weeks to the White House, which was sweet. What do you think the Israeli presidential election holds? There's a little less suspense and machinations in that race, but still,

as we've seen in the last 24 hours of press coverage, not without its lightning moments and in every aspect there's never a dull moment. So perhaps you can tell our audience who are the candidates and how it's looking.

- Well, there is only one serious candidate, and that's Bougie Herzog who is not only a former leader of the Labour Party, but the son of a former president. If Israel had an aristocracy, he may well be part of it because that's kind of how his family is viewed. He's the nephew of Abba Eban, his grandfather was the first chief rabbi of Israel. So he comes with a lot of pedigree, both as a centre left politician, but also with close ties to the religious community.

Now, maybe I'm being a little unfair because he does have one formal candidate, a woman called Miriam Paretz whose main claim to fame, she's not a politician. She lost two of her sons in separate incidences while serving in the IDF. They were killed in heroic action. And her move within kind of the way that she has channelled her bereavement and her grief to engage with all sectors of Israeli society has kind of, has promoted her or people have presented her as a wonderful icon also to be the first female president, to be a religious woman.

So there are lots of things in her favour, but I think bottom line politicians, and by the way, this vote is elected by the 120 members of Knesset. The vote happens next Wednesday, the same day that Lapid mandates end. So it's going to be an exciting day in Israeli politics. Broadly speaking, I think and if I was with her camp, I wouldn't be too complacent right now, but it looks pretty much from the outside, like a sure win that he's going to be Israel's next president and I'm sure he will serve with the distinction. You just mentioned kind of the slightly gossipy news that was led on the Israeli media yesterday of him kind of using derogatory language back in 2013, referring to his political rival Shelly Yachimovich.

What's funny is where did these revelations come out? They came out as part of the cross-examination of the trial of Netanyahu that in Ilan Yeshua, who is the former head of Walla News, who is now being cross-examined by Netanyahu's prosecuting team. They wanted to paint a picture that Ilan Yeshua was engaged in coverage and engaged with kind of deal making with all sorts of politicians from across the political spectrum and within the context of Herzog trying to gain favourable coverage came out this derogatory comment about his colleague 2013. She tweeted actually this afternoon saying that she's doing just fine. She was on holiday by Lake Como and that she forgives him. So that kind of thing is a short media window of kind of how a story from the trial kind of made it into the headlines very briefly is kind of indicative of the Israeli media here.

- So I want to sneak in one last question. As you've mentioned the trial, what lies ahead in terms of the legal steps and the charges against Netanyahu as the weeks progress? What does that look like and what should our audience watch out for as a kind of clue one way or the other?

- Well, I think First of all, don't hold your breath. This is going to take a long, long time. The just the cross-examination of Ilan Yeshua is going meant to last, perhaps the next month. Okay. And

he's just one witness out of a list of potentially dozens, if not actually in the over a hundred. I'm not sure they're all going to be called in the end. The bottom line is that there is, this is going to be a long, drawn out affair that will run along parallel to anything else that is going on in Israeli politics. And the public have kind of priced it in and just got used to it.

But that's that we have a prime minister who is managing a war and at the same time is under trial for indictment. And well, hopefully the war's not coming back anytime soon, but the trial will go on. It will cause interesting kind of snippets of headlines as we get a bigger picture of it. And as I said, the came in at the moment, is about showing that this allegations of media bias are kind of a well-known game across the media that everyone is up to that all is fair within the interface between politicians and the media. And so there's nothing unusual here. We'll have to wait and see exactly how the trial plays out. But it'll be a long one.

- Richard, thank you. I hope we managed to do whistle stop. I know that in this part of the world, there is probably at least 30 more topics that we didn't cover, but thank you very much for joining us and I'm going to hand back over to Wendy.

- Thank you very much Richard, and thanks Carly for that very insightful hour, as you quite rightly said. We'll just have to wait and see. So we look forward to having you back with us on Lockdown University in a couple of weeks, and from all of us, a huge thank you.