TRANSCRIPT

Event

“On the Ground in Israel: Expert Perspectives”

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FEATURING

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Welcome to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. I wanted to begin by noting that this is a discussion from an on-the-ground trip that several of my colleagues that I’m going to be discussing today made to Israel in December of 2023, including to the area right around Gaza, several kibbutzim – Be’eri you can see on the map, and Nir Oz.

And I’m joined in the studio here by Dr. Eliot Cohen. Eliot is the Arleigh Burke chair in strategy at CSIS and former counselor at the State Department. And then Mara Rudman is former deputy assistant to the president for national security affairs in the Clinton and Obama administrations, and an expert on the Middle East. Welcome to both of you.

Eliot A. Cohen: Well, thank you.

Mara Rudman: Thank you.

Dr. Jones: Eliot, let me start with you. Can you tell us a little bit about the trip, its purpose, the places you visited? Then we’ll get into more details about – for both of you – about what your key takeaways were, and then, you know, we’ve got a lot of stuff to cover – Iran, West Bank, the northern borders.

Dr. Cohen: Sure. So in the context of an exchange with some senior Israeli official in their Foreign Ministry, he asked if I’d be willing to bring a delegation of military and national security experts to Israel. We began the discussion in the fall, probably about – a few weeks after the October 7th attack. We raised the funding independently, so we were not funded in any way by the Israeli government, and I put together a small group. Core of it was CSIS, so you were with us. I was there; my friend Dan Byman, Mara Rudman of course, a couple of other experts. And we had about eight days on the ground in both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, meeting with a lot of military/intelligence officials, journalists, one very senior politician in the Knesset. And then we had two field trips – two long field trips – one, as you pointed out in your introduction, to Kibbutz Be’eri and Kibbutz Nir Oz. These are two kibbutzim which were overrun on October 7th. Nir Oz lost about a hundred of its 400 inhabitants. And we also went to a weapons display and things like that. And then we had another day where we went along the northern border with Lebanon and went all the way up to the corner of the Golan Heights, so we got a view there. So we were both out in the field and engaged in really intensive conversations.

Dr. Jones: And also spoke to U.S. officials, too, while there.

Dr. Cohen: And we spoke with the – absolutely. We spoke with Ambassador Jack Lew. And so it was – it was a very, very intense trip.

Dr. Jones: Anything else on the purpose or the specifics of the trip, Mara?
Ms. Rudman: Sure. I guess what I would look at was the opportunity to see the magnitude of the challenge that Israelis and Palestinians are facing and the extent to which and I would say – and I would put this in the security context that the ability to pursue the Hamas attack and not dehumanize an entire population being Palestinians and on the Palestinian side recognizing why Israeli security demands going after Hamas without equating all Israelis with trying to do in all Palestinians, and to get to secure outcomes in the region it’s going to be pretty critical to get through that kind of psychological passage for both peoples.

Dr. Jones: Yeah. You know, interesting in talking to individuals to understand their psychology and there was a level of trauma that we certainly saw on the ground.

So let’s start first with you, Eliot, and then we’ll go to Mara. What were the primary takeaways from the trip?

Dr. Cohen: So, yeah. The first top line really is what you just alluded to. This is a traumatized society. I mean, you could see it from the moment you arrived at Ben Gurion Airport where there are pictures of the hostages everywhere and when you check in at the hotel. There’s a different level of trauma, I felt, for the military and intelligence leaders, many of whom I’ve known for a long time, who are really wracked by a sense of guilt and shame and rage at their own system.

I mean, they – I think they – there’s a feeling of having broken the contract with the people of Israel. I also think, you know, the level of trauma is something that’s really palpable when you’re over there. I’ve suggested to people that if you want to get a sense of what this was like imagine it happening in the United States and multiply every number by 30. So it would be the equivalent of having had a dozen, maybe 15, 9/11s in a single day.

It would be the equivalent of having 36(,000), maybe 40,000 people massacred in a single day, 6,000 of them soldiers. It would be the equivalent of having 7,000 people taken hostage, several thousand women raped.

I mean, it is a monumental trauma and it’s been reinforced, I think, by the visuals that many Israelis have seen although many of us have not seen. Most of us sat through a video that the Israelis have put together. No commentary on it, just subtitles translating various remarks of – from body cams and dash cams and closed circuit TV and then personal mobile phones of both perpetrators and victims, and one of the things that’s particularly horrifying is the extent to which Hamas operatives were very deliberately photographing some of the most brutal things imaginable and doing that very deliberately.
So that was a – just watching that film was traumatic. Of course, very different from experiencing it. So I think that’s really the – sort of the first takeaway.

The second takeaway I would offer is I think we all learned about the systematic nature of the Hamas attack, how carefully planned, how ambitious, even more ambitious than I think most of us had realized before we went over, how well thought out, how good their intelligence was about various weak points in the Israeli security system and how deliberate it all was. This wasn’t a, you know, that they got lucky in some sense. This was a massacre which could have been, extraordinarily enough, even worse.

Dr. Jones: One issue before we go to Mara, just because you mentioned it, is if we can pull up some of the comparative data just to understand where this attack sits in Israeli history – the five deadliest terrorist attacks in Israeli history this is by far the largest, and also when we look at the eight deadliest terrorist attacks by number of fatalities per capita it’s actually striking that as we pulled up attacks in Iraq, Somalia, Lebanon, Central African Republic, and then Iraq again the number of individuals killed on a per capita basis was actually quite large.

So turning to you, Mara, what – I mean, what were the primary takeaways that you had over the course of the trip?

Ms. Rudman: I think that the, certainly, scope and scale of what happened. My footnote or two-finger on Eliot’s point about kind of multiplying numbers from 9/11, I don’t think this was your intention, Eliot, but I actually think the ways in which it was, it hit on a different, and much closer, and more personal level than 9/11. And I say that with huge awareness of the trauma that 9/11 was for the country as a whole and for people who were related to those who were killed and suffered there. But I say this because it was absolutely up close. It was not just having cameras, but it was very personal, and it was meant to be very personal, to go into people’s homes, to rape and kill and mutilate, and to show that you have the capacity to do that. And I’ll use, again, a word I used, and the lack of humanity to do that. And then, take that and multiply those numbers out.

I think all those are – go to some of the depth of trauma, the sense of an invasion in all possible ways, and a way in which what had been something of a myth of Israel’s might and kind of all-seeing ability to protect – you talked about contract with its people. I would say it went even beyond that, because throughout the region, and I’d say in the world, there is a perception of Israeli intelligence, of Israeli security, which this, you know, band of militia – what you call militia, military – but a nonstate actor that could come together over a period of years and put together this kind of attack obviously
requires not just soul searching in Israel but figuring out how things went wrong, and the people who are responsible for both figuring that out, and assessing, and figuring out how to correct, are the same people who are trying to fight the conflict now. And that, in itself, poses huge challenges.

I don’t think we can underscore the extent to which, as Eliot said, Hamas was methodical, was strategic, put in a lot of time and energy and effort in this planning. And it meant that Israel had a lot of time to understand what was going on and to see. And whether they relied on technology and not human intelligence, whether they – I would say, some of the top Israeli leaders, political and military, lost the ability to know their adversary, which is a huge component of being able to defeat or manage or anything else a conflict. And their adversary knew them a lot better than they knew their adversary.

Dr. Cohen: Actually, if I could just jump in on that. You’re completely right about all those things, including the point about 9/11. This is really personal for every Israeli. One way or another, everybody has been touched by this. The one thing I just might qualify a little bit in my turn would be Hamas is – it may not be formally a state, but they have state-like capabilities. So this is – you know, it’s a military that’s organized, five brigades, you know, 24 battalions.

Watching that video, which includes particularly the lead Nukhba forces, which were the first wave. Seth, you should speak to this too, because you’ve actually had a lot of – a lot more time than I’ve had on the ground in Afghanistan and places like that. They moved very professionally. They exercised good fire discipline. They were extremely well equipped. They were – they were acting as a somewhat state-like military, backed by – then by a less-disciplined kind of infantry, and then by mobs that came out of Gaza to, you know, further plunder, and rape, and kill.

And I think that there’s a large lesson for us in this because, you know, one of the themes I think we talked about together on the trip is the issue is not just – the issue goes well beyond the Middle East. I mean, you’ve had in this case, as you had in Russia-Ukraine, a military that is pretty formally organized and kind of looks like a military which is very deliberately using terrorizing a civilian population, to include sexual violence. And I think that’s something we – you know, we have to talk about. You know, it rose to the surface during the Bosnian war, but people don’t talk enough about it. As a – it is a deliberate tool of war. And it’s hideous, but it’s entirely calculated.

Ms. Rudman: As is locating your forces under hospitals and mosques and schools. So one side is obligated to follow the laws of armed conflict and the other side not only doesn’t use them, but flouts them quite strategically.

Dr. Cohen: Very deliberately, yes.
Dr. Jones: You know, it was – there were a couple of things that were interesting to me along these lines. One is I think I had a – I had understood to some degree the intelligence failures in identifying what was going on, and there were a range of reasons for that. What I had not fully appreciated is the failure of the Israeli Defense Forces to respond once the attack started. And there was one moment as we were walking around Nir Oz by someone who had survived the attack, and when he talked through the initial breaches of the kibbutz at several gates, and seven-and-a-half hours later the IDF shows up to a kibbutz that lost a quarter of its population. And we had just driven there. I mean, I had been down to that area before. But it was about an hour drive or so. And the reality is it took the Israeli Defense Forces a long time to respond to that. So it was more than just a general intelligence failure.

Ms. Rudman: And you could hear, by the way, in his voice the broken contract.

Dr. Jones: And you could hear in his voice.

Ms. Rudman: The point that you made.

Dr. Cohen: Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Jones: Yeah. And they were – people from the kibbutz that we spoke to in front of IDF soldiers taking us around were clear that their military failed them.

Dr. Cohen: You know, I think the thing is that the context in some ways is not previous terror attacks; the context in some ways, for a lot of Israelis, is 1973. But this is much worse than 1973. This was an attack on the civilian population, where '73 wasn't. It was an attack on, you know, pre-'67 Israel, which 1973 wasn't. You know, 1973 got turned around within a couple of weeks. This is not really turned around. And it is a multilevel failure. And you know, we could go on for great length. It was a political failure. There's a strategic failure. There's an operational failure. There's an organizational failure. There are tactical failures. And so I think this is – I really do believe this is probably the most traumatic event in Israeli history. It's transforming the country.

Now, the one thing I would say that I think we – at least I felt, and I'd be curious what the two of you felt, I mean, you also saw a lot of resilience and kind of a very – and this is very typical of Israeli military history, of kind of a quick – very quick recovery, you know, civil society mobilizes, you know, people adapt to the new circumstances and are creative and innovative and all the rest. But there's also behind that a deeper societal resilience, so that has to be pointed out as well. But it is a comprehensive failure, and the Israelis will be processing this for a long time.
Ms. Rudman: I think it’s worth, though, digging further. I agree with you on the resilience point, but I also think some of the challenges and lack of readiness on the military side to deal with this implicate the, yes, resilient, but also having to adapt on the fly, and concerned me some in how the war is being pursued against Hamas and the ability to make those judgments.

So I think it’s worth unpacking a little bit, Seth. I mean, to me it was striking that, for example, clearly West Bank was prioritized over Gaza for a period of years – that major numbers of forces were moved to West Bank from Gaza, and then, for budgetary reasons, that, you know, three separate components of the Gaza command were all stationed together in the same place. So just kind of some basic stuff that made it incredibly difficult. And no prior planning, no wargaming on a potential invasion of Israel.

Dr. Cohen: I mean, there are a number of just amazing lapses. Like, so the Israelis shut down their open-source intelligence operation that was focused on Gaza; in other words, looking at television and things like that. Well, there had been a television series which – I think it was called “Fist of Fury” or something like that, which was basically a you know, not docu-drama, but something like that of an attack like this. And Yahya Sinwar – so the guy who’s in charge for Hamas in Gaza – gave the director of this thing a big award; said, yes, this is exactly what we’re going to do. You know? And nobody really particularly paid attention to that.

Dr. Jones: Yeah. When I was in Israel in August, the focus was both in the West Bank – the Israelis were conducting operations including against Hamas in Jenin, as well as deep concern about Hezbollah crossing the border up north. Not on Gaza, where – this does raise broader questions about to what degree the Israelis also overstated their abilities to deter Hamas in –

Ms. Rudman: I don’t think there are questions. I think they did, hugely, because they didn’t know their adversary.

Dr. Jones: Yeah.

Dr. Cohen: And I think that they felt that they – I think at political level, they felt they had the solution. The solution was Qatari money flowing into the Gaza Strip which, remember, the Israelis wanted –

Ms. Rudman: And facilitated.

Dr. Cohen: And facilitated. Having, I think, was it, 19,000 workers from Gaza, and they were increasing the number of permits. Now, a lot of those people were actually working in some of these settlements on the border of the Gaza Strip. And the Israelis, at least, were convinced that they were providing very fine-grained intelligence about security systems, and who was in what
house, and that sort of thing. But I think the main thing is that they felt that they had kind of a political strategic solution to include, you know, periodically punitive strikes when somebody fired missiles from the Gaza Strip.

Dr. Jones: Yeah.

Ms. Rudman: But can I – just on one of those points, though, I agree with you, Eliot, but I also think it shows the degree of lack of understanding. That, I mean, from my kind of pretty basic knowledge of Palestinian – knowing Palestinians who have lived in Gaza, are still living there in the current circumstances, if you give Hamas however many work permits, and they have the ability to control – and they will, whether or not the PA is nominally in charge – who gets those, they’re going to demand something for it.

So it should have been factored in that there was intel being provided, and not because it means that all the people – and this, I think, is an important point for people to understand. Not because all the workers coming in are Hamas people. But to be able to provide food for their families, to be able to go back and forth, there’s a price to pay under a ruling authority like Hamas.

Dr. Cohen: Of course. Absolutely.

Dr. Jones: So before we leave Gaza, I do want to turn actually to Gaza itself in a second. But I also want to pull up some of the images that came from the visits to the Gaza border on the Israeli side.

Ms. Rudman: Those are all Nir Oz.

Dr. Jones: Yeah. What struck you as you look – as you look at these? So we’ve got a – I think it was a kindergarten in the upper left corner, some of the destruction lower left. This was a dining facility. And then, Mara, what struck you about the – this is – these are mailboxes in the upper right?

Ms. Rudman: So the dining facility – and it was the community grounds on which the mailboxes also existed – was itself attacked. There were bullet holes in the door. The kitchen, I think, had been burned. No one had been inside the facility at the time. But then what the kibbutz has done, some of the kibbutzniks who survived, basically made this display. So the tables that you see in this picture are set for dinner with – and I get chills literally now just looking at the photo – it took up about 25 percent of the dining area. And those are tables of people who were killed or hostages.

Dr. Cohen: Yeah, by family.
Ms. Rudman: By family, exactly. And so that – we had kind of walked around to look at those. The mailboxes have marks of – so it’s the total universe of mailboxes for the kibbutz. And the red are people who were killed. And you can’t really see in this picture, but there’s both black and another dark color, that the black are people who are current – were at the time, mid-December, currently hostages. And the other slightly different color were people who were returned hostages. One of whom we saw while we were there. An older woman who had just come back a few days before and has since written quite an eloquent piece in The New York Times, that I’d commend to people for her view.

Dr. Jones: So, first to Eliot on Gaza, your sense of the military operation so far, what the Israelis have accomplished, what they haven’t. And then, Mara, your perspective too on the Palestinian side. Because, you know, the numbers are pretty significant right now also of Palestinians that have been killed or wounded. So where are the Israelis at right now, and?

Dr. Cohen: Yeah. So I think we may have somewhat different perspectives on this. You know, I look at this from the perspective of military history, which is where I start from. The Israelis are going into a very densely urbanized area, which is even more thoroughly fortified than they had realized. There was just a piece in The New York Times about this, that it turned out the tunnels systems were – we’re now talking, like, 350 miles of tunnels. But they’re not just tunnels. They’re bunkers. And, I think, 5,000 shafts to exit them. It’s quite extraordinary.

And, you know, they’ve been going in. And this is kind of a grinding, attritional battle. I think from a military, technical point of view – and, you know, you also should give your judgement on this, I think – they’ve actually done pretty well. I mean, they – you know, urban warfare is notoriously the most costly, both for the soldiers fighting in it, but also for the civilians. Like one marker I would just put down for everybody to think about, in February of 1945, we liberated Manilla, which was a friendly city, from the Japanese. And 100,000 Filipino civilians died in that. And, you know, you can talk about other urban battles of World War II. That’s not out of line.

The one other thing I’ll say, just on the Palestinian casualty issue, the Palestinians – let’s assume that their numbers are correct. The Palestinian numbers don’t distinguish between fighters and civilians. And the Israeli estimate – and I have no idea if this is accurate or not – is that they’ve killed about 9,000 Hamas combatants. Maybe. I don’t know. But my guess is some proportion of those are that. But there’s no question that I think Palestinian civilians have been suffering a lot during this.

I guess my feeling is I don’t know any other way that it could have been done. I don’t think the Israelis – I think the Israeli rules of engagement are
probably laxer. I’m sure they are more lax than they were in previous operations. But I also, from everything I’d read, I think they’re within the law of armed conflict, which is actually pretty permissive about what you can do. And I think the Israelis are showing their usual kind of innovativeness, technologically as well as tactically. The question is, where does it lead? I mean, that’s the old strategic question.

Ms. Rudman: Because for law of armed conflict, you need means to meet ends.

Dr. Cohen: Yeah. So I think where they’re going to end up, if I had to guess, I think they have really severely damaged Hamas. I don’t think there’s any doubt about that. I think they will eventually get the Hamas leadership. I think that’s only a matter of time, because one of the things that happens is armed forces come into contact, you generate more information, as they have because they’re capturing people who talk, and they’re capturing computers, and phones, and things of that – of that kind. But will they be able to completely eliminate Hamas as a movement? I don’t really – I don’t really think so.

Dr. Jones: No. I’ll jump in categorically. They will not.

Dr. Cohen: Right. But I think that – what I think will happen – and I’m very cautious about this, so all kinds of caveats. I think they will eventually get Sinwar and his key deputies – Marwan Issa, Mohammed Deif – and that will allow them, in a way, to kind of declare victory and pull back. But I think the future of Gaza is going to look something like this: First, the Israelis will fortify that border. You know, it’ll be minefields and it’ll be kind of like the DMZ in North Korea. I think they will – they may have a pause in the fighting with Hamas, if there’s a prisoner exchange, but there will be no ceasefire. So if they get what they think is a legitimate shot at Hamas operatives training, or certainly at leaders, they will take it going forward. And this is, I think, now going to be war to the death. It’s not – they’re not going back to anything previous.

And the problem is going to be, what do you do about the administration of the Gaza – of the Gaza Strip? And I think that’s a – I’d be curious to know how the two of you think that that can play out. I just don’t – I don’t see any good solution. I don’t think the UAE is going to want to run it, or Saudi Arabia, or Egypt, or Sweden, Finland, the EU. The U.N. certainly can’t do it. The Israelis don’t want to do it. If I had to guess what the Israelis will end up doing quietly, with the help of some of the Arab states who have not broken relations with them – which is quite interesting, actually, I think – they will cut deals with local clans to the extent they still exist. There will be kind of a Palestinian Authority fig leaf of some kind. The Egyptians and Emiratis will be there in the background. But it’s going to be a messy, messy situation.

Dr. Jones: All right, Mara, over to you.
Ms. Rudman: So that’s not a sustainable outcome, at all. And so I share your view and sense, without, obviously, the depth that you have on military history and on how brutal this kind of conflict is for civilians, and that what is happening now is not unlike what has happened historically in situations where I would say, as with here, the country going in and the country taking the action is well justified in the action it’s taking. I think what’s hard is for both the country going in – in this case, Israel – and the international community to figure out what the objectives are and what their interests actually are, and not have the immediate – the immediate blind them to the – to the longer term. And that’s what I fear right now, Eliot. And I fear it, frankly, in some of what your response is, because it’s 2 million people who are living in Gaza. And if the goal is to eliminate Hamas and you execute in this fashion the conflict going forward for an indeterminable period of time, you are not going to achieve your objective. You –

Dr. Cohen: I didn’t – I didn’t say they would. All I was trying to say, what is – you know, Seth, you asked me what do you think is going to happen. That’s what I think is going to happen, because I don’t hear a plausible alternative story that I can imagine the Israelis or anybody else buying into.

Ms. Rudman: So I actually think that the alternative approach does involve moving towards bringing the West Bank and Gaza together, having a whatever you call it, the structure that was the Palestinian Authority significantly revamped. I do not think you’re going to get the kind of investment from countries in the region without doing that and without having a trajectory to doing that.

I fully appreciate that that is not possible, as I see it, with the current coalition in charge in Israel. And I think that that coalition will change. I think the question is when. And I think it’s important to discuss there’s a direct internal conflict for Prime Minister Netanyahu in his own personal political gains, and which, frankly, includes having this conflict go on for an extended period, and finding a way to pivot to another phase, which I actually thought was beginning with the targeted killing in Beirut of the West Bank commander, who had been a nexus point between Iran and the Gaza military leadership. But I believe that the conflict, while I agree that there should not be a ceasefire per se, needs to move to a much more strategic and targeted approach. There needs to be conscious effort – whether Israel wants responsibility for Gaza or not, they have that responsibility. It’s not an option for them to walk away from the 2 million Palestinians that are living in Gaza, just in the same way they share responsibility for what’s happening in the West Bank. And so part of that is how – what’s the most effective way to execute on that, and that is working with others who may not share the exact same viewpoint you have but that gets to some kind of approach that is more effective, ultimately, in guaranteeing the security of Israel than the path that they’re on.
Dr. Cohen: Again, I want to be very clear. I'm talking about what I think is likely. You know, what would be desirable, there are all kinds of things that would be desirable. And I guess, you know, part of my deep skepticism is a deep skepticism about the Palestinian Authority and the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority in the Palestinian world. You know, in the West Bank, Hamas is actually very popular right now, you know? I don't know what an alternative to the PA would be, but I’m not sure that PA is going to reform itself. And I don’t think, I mean, given how badly they’ve done in the West Bank, the idea that they would be able to effectively run Gaza, I just don’t see it. I mean, I wish I could agree with you.

Ms. Rudman: But my problem, Eliot, with how you're talking is that it’s as if all of this is occurring in a vacuum, that the PA on its own managed to be so horrendous, that the Palestinian people are not movable in the same way, frankly, a major portion of the Israeli people – we’ve seen over years that populations in the middle – it’s true in this country, too – can wildly swing back and forth depending on what options are given them and how they move forward. So no one is an island in this context, and I think it’s a mistake to talk and think about it as an island.

Dr. Jones: So one question along these lines, Mara, for you first is what’s the role the United States should play in all this including actually more broadly kind of the – a two-state solution discussion? What’s the role of the U.S. in this and what should the U.S. play?

Ms. Rudman: I’m of the view that here as in many other places the United States’ role is as an indispensable partner and that’s an ability to bring people together. I would say, first of all, it’s a mistake to start any kind of discussions, negotiations, about two states now but it is in helping to figure out how you align the parties to get on a pathway towards that as being in everyone’s security interest.

You know, you can talk about values down the road. I think to me this is about immediate security, addressing what’s sustainable in the region, and for the United States it’s in the United States’ interest to do that because we clearly need a stable and secure Middle East and we need to not have room for China and Russia to play the roles that they’re already starting – they have been playing for some time and to have that grow further.

And so for the United States it is clearly worth the investment of our time and energy and resources to move things in that direction.

Dr. Jones: So I want to take one of the issues you just raised, kind of the broader Middle East, and move us to the north. One of the areas visited during the trip was of the Israeli border with Lebanon. So if we can pull up the slides. We’ve got a
range of outposts here and then I do want to start, Eliot, with you with a photograph from the trip. So what are we looking at here?

And then for both of you, you know, there certainly is a lot of concern. We do see skirmishes already at that border. What is your concern about sort of the broader spread of violence? But let’s start with what we’re looking at first.

So what we’re looking at here is this is Israel. That’s basically the forested part, and the more barren part that’s Lebanon. So this is the one section of the border where the Lebanese have the high ground and the Israelis are on somewhat lower ground. If you go further west the Israelis are on the high ground.

What you’ve been seeing this – you know, Hezbollah initiated this immediately after October 7th so it’s not they were provoked into this – is, you know, continual exchanges of fire. On the whole, both sides have been – tried to be restrained about not going after civilian targets for the most part, although civilians on both sides have been killed, but it’s – we went up there. It is – I doubt actually we’d be able to go to some of the places we went now.

There’s shooting that’s going on to a depth of, like, five kilometers or seven. In fact, the Israelis have evacuated their northern border to get a depth of about five to seven kilometers, same as in the Gaza Strip. So, you know, another dimension of this to remember is the Israelis now have an internally displaced persons population of about 200,000.

Again, apply the rule of 30. That’d be like having 6 million displaced Americans. The thing that is, I think, really striking actually is the previous map, if I could – if you could just pull that back up.

Yeah, if we go back to that.

You know, all those outposts. When we talk to Israeli military planners their basic point is, look, if you look at the structure of Hezbollah forces it’s like Hamas only better. They’re better armed. They have this – instead of the Nukhba, which were the kind of elite light infantry, you have the Radwan, who probably helped train them, by the way.

They’re better equipped and they are all along the border, and the concept of operations is essentially the same. That is to say, at some point you have a simultaneous attack on the border kibbutzim and you take hostages and you pull back, and the tunnel networks and so on are even deeper and more extensive and harder to get at because they’re in rock rather than the softer soil of Gaza.
And, of course, this is in violation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701. Hezbollah is supposed to be behind the Litani River. What does all this mean?

**Ms. Rudman:** Which is the faint blue line that’s there.

**Dr. Cohen:** Yeah. So what does all that – there you go. There’s the Litani River. So they – Hezbollah is supposed to be behind that. So what does all that mean?

**Dr. Cohen:** First, there is a continual low-level – this would be headline news if it wasn’t for what’s going on in Gaza. There is continual fighting that’s going on up there. It sort of escalates around the edges.

But I think the main thing to understand is, from the Israeli point of view, one of the lessons that they’ve learned is they cannot count on strategic early warning. You know, that was a critical part of their defense concept for a very long time. Well, that’s gone away and they no longer believe in it. So I think the chances of them – and I think they just think they’re not going to go through that again or anything remotely like it. So I think the chances of a serious war in Lebanon are quite high. Whether it’s likely or not I don’t know, but there – enough Israelis that we talked to were thinking quite seriously about that. That’s, by the way, another reason why I’m more pessimistic than you are, Mara, about the possibilities, because I think we could be walking into an extended war on Israel’s borders if they end up doing this, and some Israeli leaders are talking about it.

By the way, I’ll – just as long as I have the floor I’ll say one other thing, which is I completely agree with you about the problems of this Israeli government. And I think it is – I mean, they’re in a terribly difficult situation, but I think this government in particular finds it almost impossible to think strategically. And you know, I very much agree that if you had a different cast of characters – none of whom would be softies, let me say –

**Ms. Rudman:** Well, if you had the War Cabinet and not –

**Dr. Cohen:** You’d have a – if you had a real War Cabinet, you know, they’d be able to wrestle with these problems, I think, better than what you got – then what you got now. But that, I think, is the –

**Dr. Jones:** Well, one of the things – before I go to Mara, what is interesting – at least what I heard repeatedly on the Iranians, because the Iranians haven’t come up – was, one, the Iranians were likely surprised by the timelines of the Hamas attack. They were not involved in the operational/tactical level. They provided assistance to Hamas. And second of all, Hezbollah was likely surprised, too, in ways that forced Hezbollah’s hands to react. So, I mean,
that’s interesting for those who have wondered to what degree Iran was involved in the actual event of October 7th.

But I’m curious, your thoughts on what you took away from the northern border.

Ms. Rudman: Deep concern. It’s the visual knowledge of just how on the edge things are, people are. And the extent – I guess I would quickly scope out to the region because we haven’t talked about the Houthis and what the United States has been involved in, how it affects shipping; the number – even since mid-December, the number of companies who have said they are no longer shipping through the Red Sea, which also has an Iran factor to it. But I would also – the reasons – and I think it’s incredibly difficult for this administration to navigate this because they know it is –

Dr. Jones: This U.S. administration.

Ms. Rudman: The U.S. administration.

Dr. Jones: Yeah.

Ms. Rudman: They know it is in no one’s interest for the conflict to expand in Lebanon, for Iran to get any more involved than they already are. And though arguable, I think you can look at various signs of Nasrallah, of Hezbollah modulating – I’m not going to use the word “moderate” with him, but modulating – the response to keep it from fully escalating with Hezbollah. I think there are signs in Iran, too, that they recognize it’s not in their interest. That doesn’t mean it won’t still happen, and that’s also part of what I’m concerned about on the Israeli side, because all of this will end up being on the United States with some extraordinarily difficult decisions. We already supply a huge amount of what Israel needs now and what they will need if they – if things up on the border with Lebanon. We know the challenge and the importance of getting stuff to Ukraine. We need to keep reserves ourselves, as well. And we have – and we know that our industrial strategy is such that the mobilization within the United States to deliver what folks need for these kinds of things is going to take more time.

And so there is a lot of interest in maximizing us ending up on the side of the equation, Eliot, where this doesn’t happen. And I appreciate that’s – I think I appreciate your talking about what you think is likely. I’m looking at how we can get ahead of that, lead the United States government, which none of us are –

Dr. Jones: Yeah. By the way, on the – on the regional dimension, I mean, what has been interesting to watch since October is the strikes against U.S. bases in Syria. These are Syria militia. These are Conoco oilfields as well as the U.S. base in
And even, frankly, after the initial U.S. strikes, we’ve now seen a response by the Houthis to target U.S. shipping and other shipping in the Red Sea. So, you know, the one broader issue – and I’m going to ask you both to provide some sort of final thoughts on where you would like to – you know, if you were advising the U.S. president right now, what you would like to see happen to – I mean, I think a full-blown regional war, whatever that looks like, would probably be in no one’s interest. So how do you – how do you manage this, Eliot? And then I’ll turn to Mara too.

Dr. Cohen: So, you know, I’ll begin by saying I’m not the greatest admirer of this administration, though I was a bigger critic of its predecessor. But I do give them a lot of credit for moving those two aircraft carriers off the coast of Lebanon at the very beginning of this, because the dangerous moment – you’re right, Hezbollah didn’t know about this. Iran didn’t know about the day. But they had been deeply involved in training Hamas. I mean, when we went to the weapons display, you know, you saw the IEDs. These were Iranian IEDs.

Dr. Jones: Explosively formed penetrators. These were –

Dr. Cohen: Right. These were the very sophisticated kinds of things that they used on us in Iraq. You look at where the weapons came from. So their fingerprints are all over this. If – there was a fraught moment I think where they may have been surprised, but they may also have been thinking, well, maybe this is the moment. Because let’s be very clear, I mean, the ultimate objective of Hamas and Hezbollah and Iran is to destroy Israel. I mean, that is the bottom line. And I think we have to understand that that is what they’re aiming for. And I do think the administration helped deter it.

Now, quick in terms of how you deal with it now, my view with the Houthis is those people do not manufacture radars. They do not manufacture missiles. They do not have targeting information. They get all this from the Iranians. And they are – and there are IRGC people – Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps – operatives on the ground training them. The IRGC is in Syria. They are absolutely in Lebanon. My view is, if you want to prevent the outbreak of a war, you make it very clear to the Iranians that if their proxies cause war like that, they are going to be the ones who pay. And so actually I’ve felt for some time that we’ve been all too hesitant in responding to the Houthis, and not just in terms of going after Houthis who are shooting off these missiles, but going after Iranians.
Dr. Jones: So there’s a term in one of Thoms Schelling’s books called “latent violence” that this sounds a little bit like. So, Mara, you get the last word.

Ms. Rudman: So I’m with Eliot on going after the Houthis. And we’re now on the third round of that. I think it’s probably a delicate balance in terms of the Iranians, because what we talked about before – the broader tinderbox and what we’re ready for or not. I think the single most important action right now is not with the administration. It’s with Congress to actually supply the funding that the administration has been asking for, for both Ukraine and Israel. Because ultimately that’s funding for the United States, for our national security interests, and, frankly, for our defense manufacturers to be able to produce what is needed for those two places. And so it is critical that that go forward to allow the administration to make the kind of careful and strategic decisions that support what is needed in Israel, and in Ukraine, and in the region.

Dr. Jones: Well, Mara, Eliot, thank you for joining us today, and thank you, those on the viewer side, for viewing this. Really appreciate you coming in to talk about your time on the ground in Israel. I mean, it is – you know, it is one thing to read about this, talk about it. It is a very different – it gives one a very different perspective to go on the ground and actually talk to people and see things.

Dr. Cohen: Well, and I want to thank the two of you and the others who have joined me. This was – we all had to pull it together somewhat at the last moment. It was stressful. It was – it wasn’t easy. And it was – but it was a collective effort. And I’m really grateful to you and other colleagues for being part of it.

Ms. Rudman: I appreciate the experience.

Dr. Jones: Well, thank you very much.

Ms. Rudman: Thank you.

(END.)