

FRANKLY SPEAKING *The* Interview



Arab News Riyadh

Three months after the US and Israel launched Operation Epic Fury against Iran, the Middle East remains gripped by instability, stretching from Gaza and Lebanon to Iran and the Strait of Hormuz.

For Nomi Bar-Yaacov, the veteran human rights lawyer and international peace negotiator, the verdict on the campaign is unequivocal.

"Frankly speaking, I do think it was an epic failure and I think that there is no question about it," she told Katie Jensen, host of the Arab News current affairs program "Frankly Speaking."

Bar-Yaacov said the operation had left the region more dangerous and diplomacy further away than before the conflict began.

"We're in a far worse place now than we were (before) Operation Epic Fury — that then changed names after 60 days to 'Project Freedom,'" she said. "And now I don't know what we're turning into, but we are a long way away from a peaceful, sustainable resolution to the conflict."

The conflict, she argued, derailed a potentially significant diplomatic breakthrough that had been quietly taking shape between Washington and Tehran under Omani mediation.

Instead of stabilizing the region or achieving regime change in Tehran, Bar-Yaacov believes the war has empowered more dangerous actors.

"This Iranian so-called new regime, an offshoot of the old regime, is much more dangerous than the old regime," she said.

The fallout from the conflict has also exposed tensions between US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, according to Bar-Yaacov, who said relations between the two leaders had sharply deteriorated.

"I know from my own sources that President Trump has been screaming down the line (at) Prime Minister Netanyahu," she said. Bar-Yaacov said Netanyahu had spent years attempting to persuade Trump to launch military action against Iran and had dramatically oversold what the campaign could achieve.

"He promised him, this is Netanyahu promising Trump, that regime change is going to be a matter of just flicking your finger."

She was particularly critical of Israeli strategic planning, arguing that while Israeli intelligence remained tactically effective, it lacked a viable long-term vision. Beyond Iran, Bar-Yaacov said the continuing war in Gaza and mounting tensions in Lebanon were symptoms of a broader failure to pursue a meaningful political settlement to the Palestinian issue.

"The two-state solution is the only solution that we have," she said, pointing to the Arab Peace Initiative first launched by Saudi Arabia and endorsed by Arab League states.

Bar-Yaacov also cast doubt on Trump's push to expand the Abraham Accords by bringing additional Arab



NOMI BAR-YAACOV
INTERNATIONAL NEGOTIATOR

Assessing Operation Epic Fury

Veteran mediator says Iran war deepened regional instability, widened Trump-Netanyahu tensions and pushed Arab-Israeli normalization further out of reach



states into normalization agreements with Israel.

She said the US president was seeking a symbolic diplomatic victory alongside Netanyahu.

"President Trump would like to have some sort of family photo and announce some great peace agreement," she said.

But she insisted that Gulf states would not normalize relations with Israel without

a credible pathway toward Palestinian statehood.

"At the moment, there is occupation in the West Bank, 60 percent of Gaza is occupied, all of South Lebanon is occupied."

In Gaza itself, Bar-Yaacov said military operations had failed to eliminate Hamas and were instead radicalizing the conflict further.

"Hamas is there," she said.

"They're there. They're not going anywhere ... No Arab state is going to disarm Hamas.

"With every assassination, you get another leader that is just as extreme or more extreme."

Bar-Yaacov said a future settlement in Gaza would require the deployment of a Palestinian technocratic government backed by regional and international monitoring mechanisms.

She repeatedly stressed the importance of verification, compliance and dispute resolution mechanisms in any future peace process involving Gaza, Lebanon or Iran.

Turning to Lebanon, Bar-Yaacov rejected suggestions that Hezbollah had eclipsed the Lebanese state. "I don't think Hezbollah is the real center of power," she said.

She questioned why the Lebanese government had not received the same level of international support now

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Main and bottom: Bar-Yaacov tells 'Frankly Speaking' host Katie Jensen that Israel's military operations in Lebanon are strengthening Hezbollah politically. AN photos

At the same time, she argued that continued Israeli military operations inside Lebanon "are strengthening Hezbollah and weakening the government."

Despite the bleak outlook across multiple fronts, Bar-Yaacov insisted diplomacy remained the only viable path forward.

"There is no military solution to any of the conflicts that we've been discussing," she said.

"So we just need to strengthen the diplomatic path because it is dialogue and is the only way forward."

She called for a broader regional coalition committed to stability, arguing that Gulf states had a direct interest in preventing Lebanon from collapsing into another civil war.

"If Lebanon ... becomes again a failed state, if there's going to be a civil war again in Lebanon, that will threaten the whole region," she said.

Bar-Yaacov dismissed the notion that Netanyahu was merely constrained by far-right coalition allies such as Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich.

"He's a very experienced prime minister and he can stop them if he wants to, but he has allowed for this to happen," she said.

She warned that Israeli territorial expansion in the West Bank, Gaza and Lebanon would create enormous challenges for any future Israeli government.

Still, she predicted that far-right parties would not remain in the next governing coalition.

"I think the public in Israel is really fed up with the extreme government," she said. "I can firmly predict that the extremes within his government are not going to be in the new government."

However, she stopped short of predicting Netanyahu's political demise. "With Netanyahu, he's such a shrewd, calculating politician," she said. "It's not possible for me to tell you now what he's going to pull out of ... how many rabbits he has in the hat."

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flowing into neighboring Syria.

Bar-Yaacov acknowledged the enormous challenge facing the Lebanese army, which she said had roughly the same number of troops as Hezbollah fighters.