

## Transcript

Good morning and hello everyone. Welcome to the ACLS new project called The Phoenix. The Phoenix is going to be a weekly or biweekly podcast where we will host and discuss many important topics with top US policymakers, experts, and also experts from the region. Our purpose of the Phoenix is to spread awareness, to discuss important and relevant matters to US national security, and also to the security of the region. I have here with me, without further ado, Mr. Joel Rayburn, the founder director of the American Center for Levant Studies, and I would like to use his time right now to ask him to briefly give us his opinion on what is going on in the region as far as the Israel-Hamas War, as far as the Red Sea crisis, where we are going to be hosting Admiral Roughead very soon and we will be talking to him about it more extensively. But I also wanted first to talk to Mr. Rayburn because, sir, you are a former diplomat, you are also a former military expert. And you have a lot of knowledge about the region. You have written several books on Iraq, and you were in Iraq for a couple of years. You were also in Afghanistan. So you know the region as well as anybody here in DC does. I want you to please first introduce the Phoenix to our listeners, to our viewers, and then please help me understand what is going on in the region right now.

Sure. It's my pleasure, Rania. It's a pleasure to be speaking to people who have been following the work that we've been doing at the American Center for Levant Studies. Just a word on why we started this center. It seems clear that there's a big gap in understanding or a mismatch in understanding between the United States audience and the Middle Eastern audience. There's been a great difficulty in understanding the intentions and the reactions

and so on, and just the worldviews between people in the Middle East and people in the United States, not to mention people in Europe and other regions, but in particular, there's a special relationship that's developed between the people of the United States and the people of the Middle East. The things that happen in the Middle East have huge implications for the lives of people in the United States. That's certainly been true over the last more than 20 years, and vice versa as well. Things that happen in the United States, political developments, cultural developments, and so on, have had a huge impact on the lives of people in the Middle East, for better or worse, in both directions. And so many times, I think people on both ends of this relationship don't understand how people on the other end of the relationship see the world, see one another, and interpret actions and intentions.

So we're trying to do our part at our center to be able to explain to a Middle Eastern audience what the United States thinking and planning and intentions are, and not just of the US government, but of people in the United States because there are so many centers of influence in the United States beyond just the government and then vice versa, to help people in the US government and beyond to understand developments and how people are thinking and interpreting events in the Middle East. And I think it's never been more important than now to have that kind of a bridge of understanding between the two ends of this relationship with what is not really certainly there is a military campaign going on between Israeli forces and Hamas in Gaza, but there's a broader conflict that's raging across the entire Middle East, goes way beyond Israel. It goes way beyond Hamas. That involves the Iranian regime with the support of its international allies, including China, Russia, and

North Korea, waging a very long campaign to try to exert its influence in a way that's quite destabilizing across the Middle East.

And there's a coalition on the other side that is sometimes formal and sometimes not formal. Between the major Arab states, the United States, Israel, Turkey in some ways.

So, these are the developments, this is the geopolitical context against which something like what happened on October 7th and the Israeli reaction to it takes place. Things are heating up, I think, both with the Red Sea crisis, but now most recently with what was probably an Israeli airstrike. The Israelis haven't acknowledged that, I think. It took place in the Dahiya, which is the Hezbollah dominated neighborhood of southern Beirut which wound up in the killing of Saleh Arouri, one of Hamas's major strategists and leaders and to just to put things in context, one of our friends and another think tank has described Saleh Arouri to Hamas as Imad Mughniyeh, the operational mastermind behind so many different plots and as well as the security and political relationship between Hamas and the Iranian regime.

Isn't it true that Saleh Arouri just a couple, maybe a couple of weeks ago, he refused to go talk to the Israelis about a possible ceasefire. He was one of the top leaders in Lebanon who announced that this is not something that the Palestinians want. They do not want to reconcile, and they do not want to discuss any kind of hostage release, am I correct?

Well, Saleh Arouri, not just I wouldn't say he was speaking for Palestinians. He certainly was speaking for Hamas. And I think you have to say, along with Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Deif and

Ismail Haniyeh and Khalid Meshaal, Saleh is one of the top five leaders of Hamas and has been for almost 20 years. He has been basically a Hamas chief in Lebanon and Syria with having a major, especially over time, as Hamas has become closer and closer to the Iranian regime and has become more and more enmeshed with the IRGC and with Hezbollah. Saleh Arouri has been the major guy who's been interacting with the Iranian regime, as well as with Hezbollah and the Assad regime.

It's really interesting that we here in Washington, D.C., in the United States, we say that when actually what I'm hearing in the Arab world right now is that they are analyzing what happened with Arouri yesterday as a game of Hezbollah. And they're saying, okay, Hezbollah has sold out Hamas. Hezbollah has given the coordinates of Saleh Arouri, like Israel needs to know the coordinates from Hezbollah, and that this is a gift that Iran had given to Israel, and just the conspiracy theories that are going on right now between the Arabs. And can you please explain it to us in a very easy way? Did Hezbollah help Israel kill Saleh Arouri?

There is zero chance. There is zero chance that Hassan Nasrallah and Hezbollah or the Iranians assisted the Israelis in finding and killing Salah Arouri and those and the other Hamas figures that were with them. There were some other senior operatives with him at the same time. There's zero chance that Hezbollah intended for that to happen. This was strictly a matter, I think, of the Israelis being able to exploit the intelligence and to find out Arouri's location and to take him out in a way that is quite impressive because it's that that is a very difficult area, I think, for anybody to penetrate into the Dahiya.

And that takes me to another very important question, which is rightfully important. Now, we all know that the Israeli army is famous for its precision targeted strikes, i.e. all the strikes that they did in Syria are very precise, and even those who are in very

close proximity areas to the targeted strikes that are taking place in Damascus, for example, are saying, oh, we know we're going to be safe because the Israeli strikes are so precise that the others that are not implicated in crimes and terrorism are not going to be hurt. The question here is, and it's a rightfully due question, where has been, where is, where has been the Israeli military precision for the last 2 or 3 months now? Why didn't Israel take this option of tactical procedures or tactical operations instead of having so many innocent people killed?

Well, I think it's a comparison of apples and oranges. These are two different situations. Why? Because every senior Hamas commander and leader in Gaza is embedding themselves inside civilian infrastructure, civilian homes, and basically surrounding themselves with human shields and doing it in a subterranean way and it's purposeful to embed themselves in a civilian population and basically keep those people as hostages and to leave it so that if someone wants to target them, wants to target those Hamas operatives, that they have no choice but to do it with collateral damage. That was the point. It's a strategy. It's one that actually has been very successful for Hamas in Gaza.

The difference is that in the Dahiya, there's no need for Hamas and Hezbollah to do that because that's an area that they control with impunity. They don't have to embed themselves in a civilian population and use them as human shields. But I think actually, if

you go further south, actually, the United Nations forces noted that Hezbollah operatives and Hamas and Islamic Jihad operatives who were located in the Lebanon-Israel border zone, do embed themselves in the civilian population along in the border zone and use the civilian communities as essentially human shields. So it actually, if Saleh Arouri had been in the border zone and the Israelis were trying to target him there, it probably would have been something similar to what they encountered in Gaza, just albeit without the huge, extensive tunnel network as far as we know. So, in other words, to specifically answer your question, I don't think the Israelis have a precise capability that they're not using in Gaza. They're using, I'm confident the Israeli forces are being as precise as they can be in Gaza, but they've just come to a calculation where it doesn't mean that they're going to allow Hamas to shoot at them from behind civilian shields and the Israelis then to render themselves defenseless. They can't do that in the aftermath of October 7th. But that's why there's a difference between what you're seeing in Gaza and what you saw in the Dahiya.

Do you agree with me that Israel may be at risk of losing everything that was accomplished through the Abraham Accord, seeing that the UAE is now filing concurrently at the United Nations Security Council, a ceasefire plea. Everybody in the Arab world is angry with Israel. Like for some reason, the Israelis don't have the right to protect themselves or even seek revenge for their women who were raped and concurrently or always. What I'm seeing is that nothing on the Arabic media is being published on what happened to the Israelis on October 7th. They're not talking about it, and they're not letting their people know about it, which I think is sad. I think nobody in the Arab world, the Muslims in the Arab world, would agree to what Hamas did, how they raped women, how they

killed innocent children, how they put them in the oven and baked them and burnt them alive. All of these atrocities. It seems like either the Arab world is not aware or aware and wants to continue to defend these actions. What is your message to the Israelis about What should they do to make sure they do not lose more friends? I understand that a lot of the Arabs are angry because of the high death toll, because of the level of destruction that's taking place in Gaza. But is there something else that the Israelis can do to not lose their friends? And what should the Arabs know about October 7th?

Well, I think for all Israelis, the millions of them, the world changed on October 7th, and it'll never be the same for them, because for the first time since the end of the Holocaust, they perceived themselves as under existential threat to a degree that made them think that they were under a test of national survival and that if they don't render Hamas no longer a threat now, a military threat now, then their national survival can't be assured. That there may not be an Israel for their children and grandchildren. That's the attitude that I'm hearing from Israelis across the spectrum in Israel. And that means that I think they would hope to be able to maintain the new relationships that they've developed before and under the auspices of the Abraham Accords. But they're not going to do that at the expense of their national survival and not take decisive action against what they perceive to be an existential threat, a test of their national survival. That's where they are right now. And there's no measure of Arabic media, no measure of political pressure from other quarters, I think that's going to change their minds about that. I also think that many Israelis believe that October 7th happened because they tolerated a situation where the Iranian regime was projecting power on Israel's borders and essentially buying a border in Gaza, buying a border with Israel in

Lebanon and Syria, trying, as we've seen, to arrange an Iranian influence on the border in the West Bank.

And so there's been a dawning attitude among Israeli national security thinkers that maybe it's time to push the Iranians off of all of Israel's borders. And so it's not just a matter of a campaign to destroy Hamas as a military organization in Gaza permanently. But then also to turn their attention to the North. And I think that's one of the reasons why you've seen more Israeli military activity going into Lebanon, going into Syria. However, you also have to say it's the Iranian regime and Hezbollah, they've been stepping up their action. This is another thing that I've noticed. There have been a lot of takes on whatever the Israelis are doing and in particular, yesterday there were a lot of knee-jerk responses to the probably Israeli strike that took out Saleh Arouri as it is being described in a lot of quarters as an escalation, an Israeli escalation. But I think the Israelis would say, well, October 7th was the escalation, actually. And the Israelis are still responding to October 7th to try to restore deterrence as opposed to escalating.

There's also a bit of a propaganda line that's coming, I think, from quarters, especially quarters that are sympathetic to Hezbollah and the Iranian regime, which is alleging that the Israeli government or Prime Minister Netanyahu in particular, are trying to provoke Hezbollah and provoke the Iranians. And as a result, to create a situation where the United States will be dragged into a war, be dragged into Israel's war, Prime Minister Netanyahu's war.

I don't think the Israelis are driven by those kinds of motives. And I don't think that's the way Israelis see it. Saleh Arouri is one of the top strategic commanders of Hamas. And he is, as I said, the guy

who has been managing the relationship, the supportive relationship between Hamas and the Iranian regime via Damascus and Beirut in particular, and southern Lebanon. So he is it's as though he's a commander on the battlefield, engaged in a war against the Israelis. And I don't think it's a matter of sort of political escalation that the Israelis would strike him.

In your military opinion, what is more effective, taking out the leaders of Hamas or taking out the militants inside Gaza?

I think with an organization like Hamas, I mean, you have to say, the track record and it's somewhat different than it was in al Qaeda or Daesh is that these organizations, Hezbollah, the Revolutionary Guards, the Iraqi militant groups, and Hamas that have very strong hierarchies and very strong command figures who have been in place for a long time, have a lot of credibility, a lot of power within those organizations and between the different arms, the different proxies of the Iranian regime. I think you have to say that going after leadership in that environment does have a very significant effect on those organizations and their ability to operate. If you look at, for example, Hezbollah militarily, I don't think has ever been the same in the aftermath of the strike that took out Imad Mughniyeh, similarly with Mustafa Badreddine, I mean, Hezbollah really hasn't come up with military commanders of that stature and that level of command capability as Mughniyeh and Mustafa Badreddine, similarly, the Revolutionary Guards, for all the activities, they're very active and they've been very disruptive across the entire region these past four years. But they simply don't have the same kind of command capability that they had under Soleimani.

Qasem Soleimani was a guy who commanded the Quds Force for almost a quarter of a century. That's like if the United States had a CENTCOM commander who was just in place for 25 years. That's how and you can imagine sort of the command authority and power and influence that kind of commander would just accumulate over 25 years. That's what the Iranians had in Qasem Soleimani and on the Iraqi side, that's what they had in Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis as a militant warlord chieftain, you know, for almost 20 years inside Iraq, these kind of guys, these kind of commanders are irreplaceable. And I suspect that for Hamas, Saleh Arouri is irreplaceable. The kind of relationships, the kind of command influence and capabilities and just the knowledge in his head, the institutional memory in his head and the strategies in his head, those are probably irreplaceable for Hamas, just like what the Israelis are showing the world that Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Deif are irreplaceable for Hamas in Gaza. There's an awful lot that will probably crumble, when they're finally found.

We're heading towards the time of going to meet with Admiral Gary Roughead, and I thank you very much for your time. If you could please, introduce the idea of the Phoenix again to our viewers and listeners and invite them to come along and follow us so we can listen to what the admiral is going to have to say.

Yeah. Well, this series of engagements, the series of discussions, we're calling it the Phoenix series. We like the term Phoenix for a lot of different reasons. The publication that you oversee, along with the ACLS team on a daily basis, the news analysis and strategic analysis, we call it the early Phoenix, which is something related to what the Pentagon used to do in a yester year with a daily news analysis and summary called The Early Bird. So, we call ours the

early Phoenix. And the Phoenix, of course, is very much a Levantine figure the ancient phoenix. Phoenix is where we get the term Phoenicians or phoenixine who were some of the original inhabitants of the Levant region and also the Phoenix, you know, the Phoenix has to do with a mythical bird that is reborn out of its own ashes. It burns, but then it's reborn out of its own ashes. I think that's something that of our attitude, our hope for the entire Levant region is it

's a region that has been burning for quite a long time, but that there's a hope among all the people of the Levant, that the region can, can have a rebirth out of its own ashes and into something, into something better and have an entirely new lifespan.

So that's why we call this series, the Phoenix series and what we hope to be doing with it, as you said at the outset of this session, we hope to be connecting people who have influence and expertise on the American side, whether that's people who have been in government or are people who've been in academia or other spheres with the Middle Eastern audience. And then we hope to be able to do the same with Middle Eastern experts and Middle Eastern officials and to put them in front of an American audience. This is the entire mission of the American Center for Levant Studies. That's why we have the word American in our name. That's why we have the word Levant in our name. So for this inaugural session, if you will, we really look forward to having Admiral Roughead who's going to I think his insights on the maritime crisis not just in the Red sea, but in the broader Middle Eastern region, I think are going to be.

Admiral Roughead was in the Middle East maritime region, water for many years. And he knows all the countries in that part of the world. Correct, sir?

Yeah.

Admiral Roughead, capped his career as the chief of Naval operations. That's the most senior naval officer in the entire US military and is a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff inside the Pentagon and before that, he was the commander of the US Pacific Fleet, which is the main naval force that is patrolling the entire Pacific Ocean. And he also has had experience in the past as commander of a carrier battle group and as a destroyer, a destroyer group in the eastern Mediterranean, in the Red Sea, in the Persian Gulf during combat, during combat periods. So for periods when the United States was in combat. So we really look forward to his insights.

And if anyone can probably help us understand what's going on in the Red sea and the Houthi little boats, swimming around, I think it would be him. So, come on, let's go and meet with Admiral Roughead. And we thank you, everybody, for being with us. And we hopefully will have these kinds of podcasts either once a week or biweekly, depending on the urgency of the events. We will be discussing the most relevant events, and the purpose is to bridge the gap. So we will have American experts, we will have regional experts, and they might be together in the same session. And we will be moderating the discussions, trying to reach an understanding that is our purpose. We do hope that the region, the Middle East region, rises from the ashes. We see a lot of hope. Saudi Arabia is doing great. Qatar is doing great. A lot of Arabic

countries are growing and prospering. All they need is peace in order for them to have peace. We believe, here at the American Center for Levant Studies, that the Arab leaders and the Arab countries must take things into their own hands and first identify publicly who is their first enemy and that is Iran. Iran is the enemy of the Arab world. It is historical. Everybody knows this. They were grown to believe this. But yet. All the attempts of trying to appease Iran and to make Iran become a friendlier government, a friendlier nation, so we can all prosper and grow, we are seeing that Iran is relentless in its pursuing the Persian dream. So we want to educate people about this. We want to educate the American people about this. We want to educate the Arab people about this, and we want to be together so we can all have a better future for our children and our families. Thank you so much for this introduction, Mr. Rayburn. I really appreciate you being with us, and I will let you take over with Admiral Roughead. Let's go listen to Admiral Roughead. Thank you sir.

Okay. All right.

I'm looking forward to it.

Thank you, sir.