

“AN EXPERT VIEW FROM ISRAEL”

Series Report #78



SUMMARY OF A ‘MIDDLE EAST FORUM’ WEBINAR



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In a brief ‘Webinar’ session organized by the Washington based MEF, Ashley Perry, an adviser to Israel's minister of foreign affairs and deputy prime minister in 2009-15, provides weekly updates on Israeli politics.

SUMMARY OF ASHLEY PERRY’S WEEKLY COMMENTS

- Perry began his weekly comments by making reference to two pivotal accounts of events which had recently taken place:
 - 1. Biden’s Trip to Israel & Saudi Arabia:**
 - Perry said that in Israel there had been a lot of expectation that something ‘actionable’ would happen. But apart from the ‘Jerusalem Agreement’ that was a general re-hash of positions already held and announcements already made, nothing really significant came out.
 - As a result, in the final analysis, Biden’s trip was nothing more than a visit to Israel by an old friend of the country, to whom a medal of honour was ceremoniously presented by the Israeli president (something that in the previous week had also been awarded to the Czech President) – i.e., nothing really spectacular (especially as nothing tangible also did not result from earlier talks about the formation of an anti-Iranian alliance that included Israel with the Arab states and the US).
 - Although Biden came out with the statement that “You don’t have to be a Jew to be Zionist” which was of some PR value in Israel, his comments only infuriated the progressive wing of his Democratic Party at home – not to mention many of the Arab leaders he was to meet later and subjected him to certain amusing insinuations from the leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon.
 - Although Biden was the first US president to fly directly from Israel to Jeddah, the rather obscure statement by the Saudis that they would be opening up their airspace to all countries, did not make any kind of a serious impact and most certainly did not

serve as a catalyst for accelerating the push towards normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

- Upon arriving in Saudi Arabia, Biden was not met by the King and all eyes were on the difficult moment when he would come face to face with MBS. In the end, Biden did not shake hands with MBS resorting to a simple 'fist pump'.
- But even that gesture which in effect rehabilitated MBS before American eyes in defiance of statements earlier made by Biden, resulted in a number of attacks coming from leading Democrats such as Bernie Sanders.
- Although in his talks with MBS, Biden did allude to such issues as human rights and the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, nonetheless the Saudis also stuck to their guns by raising such issues as Abu Gharaib and the shooting death of Shireen Abu Aqla, whose family were not awarded the courtesy of meeting with Biden while he had been in Israel/Palestine.

2. The visit to Tehran by Presidents Putin and Erdogan:

- While the outcome of the trilateral meeting of leaders from Russia, Turkey and Iran remains unclear, it is generally accepted that each participant had something to gain from this gathering.
- The fact that Turkey, a NATO member and Russia, a permanent member of the UN Security Council were in Tehran negotiating with the arch enemy of the US and the status quo powers in the region, was in itself a setback for US diplomacy especially while Biden was still on his way back from the region.
- While Russia and Iran have a joint interest in pushing back US pressures, what Turkey most wanted in these meetings was to receive some form of a benediction for moving against the Kurds in Syria – a blessing neither Iran or Russia were willing to give.
- Given that Russia and Iran do have mutual interests, talks around military purchases from one another did not surprise any quarter though it raised Israeli concerns if more sophisticated missile defence systems (e.g., S-400) were to be provided to Iran.
- Some eyebrows were also raised when a senior Iranian official (Kamal Kharrazi) stated that Iran now had the knowledge and the means for producing a nuclear device – though this was quickly

moderated by another statement saying that there was an existing Fatwa that prohibited the development of any WMD.

- Perry ended this section of his comments by saying that Russian-Israeli relations were fast deteriorating, especially since Lapid had become Prime Minister because of his previous open declarations of support for Ukraine.
- This deterioration was significant in that impacted on Israeli freedom of action for carrying out operations Syria for destroying Iranian and pro-Iranian targets in that country.

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3. The domestic front

- Turning briefly to the subject of Israeli domestic politics, Perry said that the current Health Minister who is the Leader of the 'Meretz Party' had announced his resignation and was expected to be replaced by a popular former leader of his party.
- Perry said that while there were some jockeying still going on within the Likud Part, Benjamin Netanyahu will be the parties official leader for the upcoming election in November which many see as Netanyahu's final attempt in trying to regain the office of prime minister in Israel.

