

“AN EXPERT VIEW FROM ISRAEL”
REPORT # 61
SUMMARY OF A ‘MIDDLE EAST FORUM’ WEBINAR
9 MARCH 2022


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 COMMENTS

- ◆ Perry began his comments by saying that the past week had been a very eventful period that had witnessed certain unprecedented events coinciding at the same with the upcoming 2-month break that follows the termination of the Israeli Knesset’s Winter session.
- ◆ Perry said that for the first time a sitting religious PM in Israel had travelled on a Saturday, breaking with tradition (‘Shabbat’) and flying to Russia in order to speak with President Putin regarding the ongoing war in Ukraine.
- ◆ According to Perry, Naftali Bennet is the first ‘Western democratic leader’ to have visited Moscow and talked directly with Putin since the start of the current crisis.
- ◆ Naftali Bennet He was accompanied by his Ukrainian-born housing minister, Zeev Elkin. Elkin a fluent Russian speaker had in the past accompanied former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu as an interpreter in his talks with Putin.
- ◆ Subsequent to his 3-hour meeting with Putin, Naftali Bennet had travelled to Germany where he had held direct talks with the German Chancellor, having also engaged with President Zelensky of Ukraine and other European leaders by phone.
- ◆ As a result, a great deal of attention had been focussed on Bennet and his prestige has been seriously enhanced as a result of these events.
- ◆ Perry was of the view that Bennet was not playing the role of a mediator with say a set of alternative proposals in his conversations with Putin but was instead the carrier of messages (perhaps along with Turkey) from other important parties.
- ◆ In the final analysis, all parties - i.e., Russia and Ukraine, as well as the US government had been most appreciative of the efforts that had been undertaken by the Israeli PM.
- ◆ While questions remain as to the sincerity of the messages being transmitted, Bennet was left with the impression that Putin would relent on raised issues such as ‘regime change’ if Ukraine was to declare

its neutrality while recognizing a new status for Crimea and Donbass (i.e., the breakaway regions bordering Russia).

- ◆ Other issues that were discussed by Bennet and Putin had to do with the ongoing JCPOA talks where much to Israel's relief a small spanner (i.e., Russian allusion to not having its ties with Iran sanctioned) had been dropped by the Russians though an eventual agreement was in sight.
- ◆ For Israel talks regarding Iran - especially in Syria where Israel wanting to retain an open hand, had taken out 2 senior IRGC officers in the past week - a matter acknowledged by Tehran with a vow of vengeance, were of crucial importance.

THE ISRAELI PRESIDENT IN TURKEY

- ◆ Perry next spoke on the subject of President Herzog's visit to Ankara, which was being dubbed as a 're-set' in the state of much damaged relations between Israel and Turkey going back to 2008.
- ◆ He said that restoration of acceptable ties was being contemplated because of the dire economic situation in Turkey has forced President Erdogan to look for new friends and to reassess his ties with countries like Israel and the UAE.
- ◆ However, with talks likely to include possible Israeli gas lines from offshore to Europe with Turkish cooperation, Herzog had visited Greece and Cyprus in advance of travelling to Ankara in order to have the support of those countries that have a hostile tradition with Turkey.
- ◆ Perry concluded his remarks by saying that Herzog's visit to Turkey had at the same time infuriated hard-line Arab and Palestinian quarters (e.g., Hamas) who had displayed a most negative reaction.

