



Prof. John Mearsheimer on Israel/Gaza Ceasefire, Trump's Foreign Policy, Ukraine, Free Speech Crackdowns & More

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Glenn Greenwald (GG): Professor Mearsheimer, always great to see you. Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to us today. My pleasure to be here, Glenn. As usual, there is a lot to talk about in the world of foreign policy and militarism and more. We have a new administration that is now inaugurated the first time we're speaking to you, I believe since the election, certainly since the inauguration itself. And I want to start with the place where you usually start, which is the Middle East. And the most important event clearly seems to be this ceasefire deal that the Israelis and Gazans, the Palestinians were able to reach. By all reports due in large part if not overwhelmingly due to the efforts of Donald Trump and his envoy. What do you make of the timing of this ceasefire? Why after 15 months of never really getting close was this agreement entered into now?

John Mearsheimer (JM): Well, I think the key factor here, this is not to take anything away from what Trump did, but the key factor is that the IDF, the Israeli military, is in deep trouble. It's an army that was configured to fight short wars, not long wars. It's heavily dependent on reservists, and it was having a really difficult time in Gaza. Furthermore, it's quite clear, and this is certainly true if you look at the actual ceasefire agreement, that the Israelis have not been able to defeat Hamas. So it's not like if they had stayed there for another week or another month or another couple months, they would have defeated Hamas. They couldn't defeat Hamas, and the military was coming apart at the seams. So that gave the IDF very powerful incentives to push Netanyahu to agree to the deal. And that combined with the pressure from Trump did the trick.

GG: The concern that a lot of people have, who want there finally to be peace in Gaza, is the fact that this deal is structured in multiple stages, the first of which is just a six-week ceasefire where they exchange some hostages, each side does, and the Israelis are supposed to withdraw gradually from Gaza. Netanyahu has been openly saying, as have US officials and lots of other people in Israel, that they have no intention of proceeding to stage two, where the ceasefire would become something more akin to a peace deal, something more

permanent, that they just want to get some hostages back, and then they absolutely intend to resume bombing and destroying Gaza based on whatever pretext they create about how Hamas is violating the deal. Now, based on what you just said, which is that part of the reason they agreed to it in the first place was because their military just needs a respite, they're not really succeeding, they have been succeeding in killing a lot of IDF soldiers with primitive explosive devices from unexploded ordnance and the like, that would suggest that that's just something Netanyahu is saying to assuage whatever right-wing opposition he has to the deal: Oh, don't worry, we're going to get our hostages back and then we're going to go back and kill more Palestinians. Is your expectation then that this will in fact proceed to stage two and become, if not permanent, something longer term than that six weeks?

JM: I don't know for sure, Glenn, but I would say two things. Number one, there are about 98 hostages that are supposed to be exchanged, a number of whom are dead, by the way. And in the first phase, 33 hostages are returned to the Israelis. That means that 65 are scheduled to come in the second phase. And that means that if there is no second phase, 65 hostages remain in the hands of Hamas. The second point I would make to you is that, you know, the Israelis talk about restarting the war in Gaza. What exactly are they going to do? There's hardly anything left to bomb. Are they going to make the rubble bounce? And in terms of defeating Hamas, after 14 months, they've been unable to defeat Hamas. By accounts in the Israeli media, Hamas is alive and well. And there is no expectation that it's going to collapse anytime soon. So if they go back to war, do they have a formula for defeating Hamas? I think the answer is no. So the incentives for the Israelis to restart this war are just not very powerful.

GG: Here's something I genuinely don't understand. I have talked to a lot of people since the outbreak of this war, including with you, that there's an obvious lesson that the United States supposedly learned from having prosecuted this war on terror in many different countries over many years, killing a huge number of civilians, ostensibly in the name of destroying terrorism or eliminating Al Qaeda or extremism, which was that, as it turns out, when you go around the world in specific countries and you bomb people and you kill civilians, and people in those countries see the images every night of children blown up and wedding parties droned and entire cities in rubble, it unsurprisingly creates the motivation for other people who previously weren't linked to extremism to want to join out of anger and rage that, as human beings, we would all have if our societies were being attacked that way. Even Secretary of State Blinken, or – former at this point – Secretary of State Blinken, said shortly before leaving office that it seems like Hamas has been able to recruit at least as many people as the Israelis killed, if not more. And this is incredibly predictable. You and I have talked about this, everybody has talked about this, we've seen the lessons from the war on terror, so is it really just that the Israelis just think that they were capable of doing something that we've seen over and over fails, or was there something else going on in terms of their real motive? That's always the question I come back to because who doesn't know that unless you kill every last Palestinian, the ones that you leave are going to be ones that hate Israel and are going to want to get vengeance for what was just done to their society.

JM: I think the answer to your question, Glenn, is that the Israelis were not mainly interested in destroying Hamas. They were interested in ethnically cleansing Gaza. They were interested in driving all of the Palestinians out of Gaza. And that, in effect, would solve the Hamas problem, and it would also solve the apartheid problem. I mean, as you and I know, Israel is an apartheid state, and that is a huge problem for the Israelis. They know what happened to South Africa, so they'd like to put an end to that status as an apartheid state, and ethnically cleansing does that, and it solves the Hamas problem. And that was the goal. It didn't work, and of course it morphed into a genocide in the process.

GG: So I guess then that is the question, is you have Gaza, and as you said, there's basically nothing left to bomb – we've seen the drone footage now of places in northern Gaza, in southern Gaza, in Rafa, where Biden said it was a red line for him, that the Israelis not attack, and then once they did to save face, he said: "Oh, it's just a very limited pinpoint attack inside that refugee camp", and you look at it, and the entire thing has been flattened and carpet bombed. And clearly Hamas is still there. They're still the governing body, and they have not succeeded in driving the Palestinians out of Gaza. So the question then becomes, what is going to happen to Gaza if those people remain, those two plus million people, and presumably they will, at some point, it's going to have to be rebuilt. Well, what do you think the Israelis expect in terms of post-war Gaza that it would be like, and what do you think it will be like?

JM: Well, to put it in slightly different terms, the Israeli goal here was to make Gaza unlivable, and if you make Gaza unlivable, then presumably the Palestinians have no choice but to leave. They've failed in that regard. And what has to be done now is that Gaza has to be made livable, and of course you see lots of trucks with food, water, oil, and medicine coming in now, and that will help in the short term make Gaza livable. The question is what happens over the long term, and a lot depends not only on what the Netanyahu government plans to do, but what the American government plans to do, and who knows. I mean, the fact is that Hamas is still in control. Remember the IDF, this is the IDF and the Biden administration were begging Netanyahu to tell them what his plan was for once the war stopped. In other words, the IDF and the Biden administration wanted to know how Gaza was going to be administered. He refused to give an answer, and the reason is he was planning to ethnically cleanse the Palestinians. So he thought this would be a moot point. That didn't happen, but there's no plan in place, and at the same time, Hamas is in charge, and that means that if you rebuild Gaza, you'll be rebuilding it with Hamas in place. How that happens, very hard to see, so it's a giant question mark moving forward.

GG: So let's talk about, because you mentioned the vision that the Trump administration might have, what their approach is going to be. I take your point completely that the Israelis had their own motivations for needing to stop this war. The IDF has been stretched so thin. There's this controversy that could tear Israel apart about whether Orthodox Jews have to serve in the military. We had this civil war on the brink, a civil war over the question of judicial independence prior to October 7th. Israel has enormous economic problems. At the same time, it does seem quite clear, given that all of this went on for 15 months without

getting the ordeal, Trump wins, has announced that he wants this done and over with before he takes office, and then suddenly, with the role of his envoy that he plucked out of New York real estate, Steve Whitcomb, who was very aggressive by all accounts with Netanyahu and the Israelis, the deal is suddenly reached. What do you think is the vision, and I think there's nothing harder than predicting what Donald Trump's thinking about any particular subject at any given moment, but what do you think his motivation was in wanting a deal to be done that would end, for some period of time, the hostilities in Gaza?

JM: Well, I think he wanted to come into the presidency with some sort of ceasefire in place in Gaza. And I think he has a deep-seated interest in perpetuating that ceasefire. It's not in America's national interest to see this war continue, and certainly from a moral point of view, it's not in our interest to see this conflict or this genocide continue. We have a deep-seated interest in shutting this one down, whether you're Joe Biden or Donald Trump, and he had an opportunity to do that, and he did it right before he moved into the White House. And this makes perfect sense from Trump's point of view, but the big question is whether he can work with the Israelis to maintain this ceasefire and then hopefully turn it into some sort of *modus vivendi* between the Palestinians on one side and the Israelis on the other.

GG: One of the things, the accomplishments of which Trump seems proudest from his first administration was these Abraham Accords. Trump has a lot of admiration for Gulf State tyrants. They have a lot of money. There's a lot to do business with them. His son-in-law Jared Kushner has gotten very wealthy off Saudi sovereign funds and investments and the like, and Trump's vision of doing business with the Emiratis and the Qataris and the Jordanians and certainly the Saudis is very, very clear, and it's consistent with Trump's world view. And I think the assumption is that that won't happen and can't happen unless there's some mitigation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, certainly it can't happen while Israel is destroying all of Gaza and killing Palestinians in large numbers. On the other hand, you have an administration that is filled with some of the hardest core fanatics when it comes to Israel that the United States government has ever had, including people who share the view of the most right-wing extremists in Israel that the West Bank and Gaza belong to Israel biblically through religious dictate of God that has contradicted the position of both parties for decades about the West Bank. How do you see those two kinds of poles or pressure points being reconciled? That on the one hand you have these hardcore Israel fanatics, they want to go to war with Iran, they want to destroy the Palestinians, on the other hand, Trump prides himself on avoiding war, wants a kind of peace that integrates the Gulf state and normalises relations with Israel. Do you have any idea of how that's going to play out?

JM: There's no question that there is a huge tension here, and I think it's especially true with regard to Iran because all these super hawks in the United States and the Israelis themselves are deeply interested in pounding Iran and destroying its nuclear infrastructure. But Trump has made it clear that the last thing he wants is another war, and it's hard to believe he would have any enthusiasm for a war against Iran, and you would think he would be opposed to it. The fact is, and this is good news, he's in charge, and therefore I think it will take quite extreme circumstances to get him to go to war over Iran. I'm not saying it won't happen, but

there is a real possibility that he will be able to prevent the war with Iran. He would prefer to use maximum economic pressure to get the Iranians to do what he wants them to do. I'm not sure that will succeed, but that doesn't necessarily mean we'll get a war, and let's hope we don't.

GG: So I want to get back to the question of Iran in just a second, because it's such a crucial part of this puzzle. But on this question of Trump's foreign policy and the fact that he does very clearly seem to pride himself on avoiding wars that kind of comes out of the same Manhattan real estate world, where you threaten everybody, you threaten to destroy everybody, and it's all just a means of avoiding business destroying litigation and getting the best deal that you can possibly get. This is Trump's identity and personality from long before he entered politics. So you have that impulse on the one hand, but then on the other you have him escalating his threats against Panama, saying: "No, we are not just trying to get a better deal with Panama to pay lower rates for passage. We are going to take back the Panama Canal". There's the issue of Greenland, although I guess that's not really through military force, but the idea of buying Greenland against its will, some of the threats toward Canada, which seemed more trolling. But the Panama question seems to be a kind of old-fashioned imperialist approach of this is a weaker country, they have something that we want, and one way or the other we're going to take it. How does that get reconciled with this broader desire that I agree he has to avoid military conflict and more?

JM: I think he believes, and it's probably true, that taking the Panama Canal would not involve the employment of serious military force. It could be done rather simply. I'm not advocating he should do it. In fact, I think his rationale for doing it is nonsense. But anyway, he could do that relatively easily and relatively cheaply. Going to war against Iran, as you know, is a completely different matter.

GG: Let me ask you about the dynamics surrounding the deal that was reached. We've seen since the ceasefire happened an obvious and potentially protracted escalation of the use of military force by Israel inside the West Bank. Miriam Adelson, who's one of Trump's largest donors, who spent over \$100 million to help get him elected, has as the number one wish on her wish list the United States government's recognition of Israel's right to annex the West Bank. You have key people in the Trump administration, as we alluded to, like Elise Stefanik and Mike Huckabee, saying that the West Bank belongs to Israel by religious mandate. Do you think that part of the concession that Israel extracted or the sort of benefit that the Trump negotiators offered was: If you end the war in Gaza, you can start the process of annexation in the West Bank?

JM: I don't think so. In large part because I don't think there was any longstanding agreement that was reached between Trump on one side and the Israelis on the other regarding Gaza. I think what happens in Gaza is an open question. I think there's no question that Trump played a key role in getting Netanyahu to accept a ceasefire. But whether that ceasefire works out is open, as we were discussing before. It's an open question, as we were discussing before. So I don't think there was any longstanding deal, and therefore I don't think there were side payments at the time. I think that could happen over time; in other words, that Trump could

put great pressure on Netanyahu to accept some sort of settlement in Gaza. He accepts it, but the quid pro quo is he's allowed to annex the West Bank and maybe all of the Golan Heights or something like that. I wouldn't be surprised if that happened.

GG: Would that be an impediment to this broader normalisation of integrating the Gulf state tyrants into a broader peace with Israel and normalisation of the Middle East? They're obviously incapable of doing that, even if they wanted to because of their population, in terms of watching Gaza continue to be destroyed and Palestinian children killed every day. But what about the annexation of the West Bank? Is that something that could destabilise or impede the effort to normalise relations?

JM: Well, the key country here is obviously Saudi Arabia. And what Trump would love to do is he'd like to have an Abraham Accord that involves Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United States. And the Saudis have said that they will not agree to that until there is legitimate movement towards a Palestinian state, a viable Palestinian state. Whether or not the Saudis over the long term stick to their guns and insist on Israel creating or moving in a serious way to create a viable Palestinian state remains to be seen. I think it's quite clear that the Saudi elites don't have any special affection for the Palestinians and would probably sell them down the river if they could get a good deal in the process. The problem that the Saudi elites face is that there's huge pressure down below in the population to support the Palestinians. So that's why things are temporarily on hold. But I think the Trump administration thinks and Netanyahu thinks they can finesse this issue and come up with some rhetoric that vaguely promises a Palestinian state in the future. And that then is enough to satisfy the Saudi elites and you get an Abraham Accord. But the problem is, Glenn, even if you get an Abraham Accord, it doesn't solve the problem with Hamas. It doesn't solve the problem with Hezbollah. It doesn't solve the problem in the West Bank. It doesn't solve the problem in Syria. And it doesn't solve the Iranian problem. And these are all enormous problems.

GG: So let me ask about that, that is the perfect segue into what I said I want to talk about with regard to Iran. In Davos this week, Fareed Zakaria, who is someone without whom I don't think Davos can even happen, he's sort of the embodiment of Davos in terms of the media, he interviewed the foreign minister of Iran, who is a very knowledgeable and respected diplomat similar to Foreign Minister Lavrov in Russia. And he, Fareed Zakaria, was insisting that he answer the question, more so that he admit that Iran has been severely weakened by events over the last year. The fact that their air defences have been compromised to whatever extent – the Israelis claim almost completely, but certainly to some extent through the Israeli retaliation – they've lost a key ally or proxy in Assad. Hezbollah has been decapitated with the killing of Nasrallah. Hamas is degraded. And he was saying: "Clearly, Iran is in the worst position, the weakest position that it's been in some time. And then you add on to that the economic distress that sanctions are in fact causing inside Iran". And the Iranian foreign minister was naturally reluctant to admit that. But what do you think about that question? Has Iran been severely weakened, perhaps more so than any time since the revolution as a result of the events of the last year?

JM: I think it has been weakened, but not in a really significant way. I mean, losing Syria

mattered. There's no question about that. And the Iranians admit that. And I think that Syria was very important because it was a conduit for shipping Iranian arms to Hezbollah. But what happens in the future in Syria and what role Iran plays in Syria remains to be seen. But putting that victory aside for the West and for Israel, Hezbollah is alive and well. The fact that Hezbollah was decapitated is not that big a deal. The Israelis have been decapitating Hezbollah leaders and Hamas leaders for a long time. They just get replaced. Hezbollah is a formidable fighting force. It will remain a formidable fighting force and it will eventually be fully rearmed. As I said before, Hamas is alive and well. Plus, they're now dealing with the Houthis, who are another group of people who are heavily dependent and working with the Iranians. So I think the Iranians, in terms of their allies in the region, are a bit set back because of Syria, but it is not that big a deal. And with regard to the argument that Israel has destroyed all of Iran's air defences and they now have an open shot at the military installations and the oil installations, I don't believe that. I don't think the Israelis did that much damage to Iran's defences. But even if they had, I think that taking out Iran's nuclear capabilities is not feasible for the Israelis by themselves. They need the Americans and it's not clear that even with the Americans that they can do it. So the idea that Iran is this big fat target now and they can easily go in there and put an end to things with regard to the nuclear programme or even with regard to the oil infrastructure, I think is wrong. And then finally, if I'm playing Iran's hand and the Israelis and the Americans come in and they tear apart my nuclear installations and they tear apart my oil installations, what I do is I not only build a nuclear weapon, but I take that large ballistic missile force and I use it to destroy oil facilities in the Persian Gulf. And I would tell the West that not only is the Iranian economy going to be destroyed as a result of your action, but we're going to wreck the international economy by cutting off the flow of oil in large part from the Persian Gulf region. The Iranians have cards to play here and you don't want to underestimate that. So we may get rough and the Israelis may get rough with the Iranians from a military point of view, but you want to think about what their second strike capability looks like.

GG: So in part, that was the answer that Fareed Zakaria got, which was sort of a historical lesson, that in 1982, when the IDF marched through Lebanon and all the way to Beirut, the argument then was, and eventually Arafat was exiled to Tunisia, that, oh, look, the Palestinian resistance is dead, Hezbollah has been severely weakened or the resistance and so far it was based in Lebanon. And his point was the resistance is always going to be there as long as the occupation is going to be there. There's never a way to get rid of the resistance to Israeli occupation without getting rid of the occupation itself. And I think that makes a great deal of sense. But on the question of Iran, you said that if the Israelis or the Americans attempted to try and bomb the nuclear facilities, what you would do if you were them was say: Okay, now I'm going to create a nuclear bomb. I think that on some level, it seems rational for the Iranians to be thinking about that now for the very obvious reasons of the deterrence that it brings and the need for it. And there are reports, although there are always reports, what's hard to know how reliable that they are, that the Iranians are now making more advances toward a nuclear weapon than they were making previously. It's something we've been hearing for 15 years from Netanyahu: they're weeks away, they're two months away. But do these events, this kind of, Oh, Iran's so weak, we've taken away their air defences. They're a

big fat target. Does that increase the motivation for the Iranians to now want to get nuclear weapons? Or on the other hand, do the Iranians want to create the perception that that's happening to give them more leverage to get out of the suffocating economic sanctions that they are clearly suffering from?

JM: Well, I think everybody I know agrees that we are giving the Iranians greater incentive to acquire nuclear weapons. There's no question about that. And I think the Israelis secretly wish that the Iranians take another major step forward in that regard so that we then have an excuse to attack those nuclear facilities. But there's no question the Iranians would be better off having nuclear weapons. North Korea, for example, is better off having nuclear weapons than not having nuclear weapons. From an American point of view, that's not true. I want to be clear here. From an American point of view, we do not want Iran to have nuclear weapons. And that's certainly true from an Israeli point of view. But from an Iranian point of view, it makes eminently good sense to have nuclear weapons. I've often said in public that if I were the Iranian national security adviser over the past 20 years, Iran would have nuclear weapons today. Just no question about it. In my mind, they should have nuclear weapons from their point of view, not from our point of view or from Israel's point of view. But they have not gone down that road. And the question is, what's going to happen in the future? And we're betting that we can put great pressure on them, we can threaten them, and they won't go down the nuclear road. Or if they do go down the nuclear road, we will slam them, and that will be the end of their nuclear capability. This is delusional.

GG: Yeah, I mean, I don't know how you look at the events in the last 25 years, you can even go back further, but certainly the last 25 years, if you're a leader of any significant country and reach any conclusion other than the fact that if you don't have nuclear weapons, you're highly vulnerable to being attacked by the United States and Israel and the West, but if you have nuclear weapons, you will be left alone. I mean, that is the framework that we've created, where it almost makes sense for every rational leader, by definition, to want to obtain a nuclear weapon as the only means for deterring aggression against their country. And it's just so odd that we've created this incentive at the same time that we're saying that stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons is our highest national security priority. We've talked about this in the Ukraine context, it seems like the United States and US elites have lost a sort of healthy fear of nuclear weapons and the possibility of nuclear war. And this incentive scheme that has been created seems extremely clear to me, where, why would anybody be able to convince the Iranians not to obtain a nuclear weapon, given the incentives that are so obvious from how militarism expresses itself now?

JM: Well, the argument, Glenn, is that we have the economic might, and this is the sanctions weapon. We have the economic might and we have the military might. This is the threat of attack to, in effect, deter any country that wants nuclear weapons from getting them. In other words, we understand what you just said, that we're running around the world attacking countries and giving them powerful incentives to acquire nuclear weapons. We understand that we're doing that, but we think in the end we can rather easily deter anybody from actually getting those weapons, from acting on those incentives that they have, because we

have so much economic might and military might. And if you look at the JCPOA, this is the nuclear agreement with Iran that the Obama administration fashioned in 2015, basically, the story there is that we used economic leverage to get the Iranians to, in a very important way, greatly limit their nuclear capability, nuclear weapons capability. And it looked like we had basically solved this problem. But of course, Trump then walked away from that agreement. And why did Trump walk away from the agreement? Because he believed that he could use economic pressure and military pressure, the threat of military force, to get Iran to agree to a better deal. And this is what Trump is now going to try to do. He's going to try to get a better deal than we had with the JCPOA, which he walked away from in 2018. And the question you have to ask yourself is, will America's coercive leverage, its ability to threaten Iran, get Iran to give up its ability to enrich uranium and reprocess plutonium? Do you understand? That's the key issue here. The JCPOA did not force Iran to give up its ability to produce fissile material, to enrich uranium, or to reprocess plutonium. That's what the Israelis really want us to get Iran to give up. And the question is, can Trump get the Iranians to do that?

GG: The events in Syria, that's something we haven't talked to you about because we haven't spoken to you since it all happened, the US, going back to the Obama administration, had the goal of overthrowing Bashar al-Assad and unleash the CIA, at least to some extent. A lot of people thought they should have been unleashed even more, to the point where we even fought alongside of, or at least on the same side as previous enemies like Al Qaeda and ISIS that were also trying to overthrow Assad. And I think most people believe that the reason that failed, that Assad was able to remain in power, was because the Russians intervened very aggressively to protect one of their long-standing allies and client states in the Middle East, and Iran did their part as well. This time though, it seems as though both countries, for whatever reason, decided that it wasn't worth going to such lengths in order to save Assad. And as a result, neither of those countries really did much to prevent his expulsion and the takeover of Syria by a variety of factions that I want to ask you about in a second. And we've spoken both to Iranians and to Russians about why, and they had varying explanations, but the consensus seemed to be they kind of just were at their wits end with Assad, they didn't think he was worth that investment any longer. Is that your understanding of the situation that although Iran and Russia would have preferred that Assad stayed, that they were no longer willing to invest the time and resources and costs necessary to have saved him?

JM: Somewhat. My view is that there's no question the Russians, and especially the Iranians, wanted Assad to remain in power. No question there. But they came to the conclusion that it was a lost cause. And what had happened here is that over the long term, American sanctions on Syria, coupled with the fact that we controlled almost all of Syria's oil, and they were not getting any meaningful revenues from their oil deposits, those two factors hollowed out the economy and hollowed out the military. So when the trouble started in late November of last year, November 2024, in Syria, and when the attacks began against the Assad government, it became very clear that the Syrian military had been hollowed out, and there was nothing that the Russians or the Iranians could do to rescue the situation as they had done earlier in 2015.

GG: The faction that has taken over Syria is led by al-Jolani, who right until the day that he

was in Damascus, there was a page on the Department of Justice website offering \$10 million for any information leading to his whereabouts. I think a lot of people submitted tips saying: "Oh, I know where he is, he's in Damascus now leading the government in Syria", and the US considered his organisation to be a terrorist organisation. He had ties to not just Al Qaeda, but to ISIS. Overnight he kind of cleans himself up, starts wearing Armani suits, speaking in terms of diversity. I wouldn't be surprised if at some point he appears with a pin on his lapel of the rainbow flag, clearly trying to present himself as a sort of Western, appealing, moderate leader. And we've seen this many times where people get transformed from vicious terrorist to heroic leader or heroic leader to terrorist. But what do you see as Syria's future in terms of who now is actually controlling the internal events inside that country?

JM: I think it has a bleak future, and it's in large part because the Turks are interfering in the northern part of Syria. The Americans and the Kurds are in the eastern, mainly northeastern part of Syria. There's no evidence we're leaving. The Kurds are a thorn in the ruling government's side. And then the Israelis now occupy a large slice of territory in southern Syria. And then on top of this, it's not clear that the Jolani faction of the new government is going to get along with the other factions. There are all sorts of disagreements among the rebels who are now in charge in Syria. So it's hard to see how you hold this all together. I actually was not surprised that the Syrians are trying to keep the Russians in Syria. A lot of people thought at first that the Syrians would push the Russians out, they'd be glad to see them go. But I think the Syrians believe that they need all the help they can get, and if they can get help from the Russians, all for the good. I mean, Assad got help from the Russians. It may be the case that the Jolani government needs help from the Russians as well. But if I were running Syria now, if I were in Jolani's shoes, I'd be having difficulty sleeping at night thinking about how I'm going to run this country, given all the different players who are physically located inside my country, and given all the fault lines among the different groups who call themselves Syrians.

GG: The Israelis, Netanyahu in particular, not only celebrated these events, but even seemed to want to take credit for them. And I obviously understand the reasons why the Israelis have long wanted Assad out of Syria, all the reasons that you already talked about, his relationship with Iran, and the importance of using it as a weapons supply route for Hezbollah and the like. But it seems like a pretty big gamble, and I get as well that the Israelis got to do what they want inside Syria. They destroyed a large amount of military equipment that the Syrian army had built up over many years with Iran. They have been able to make incursions inside Syria without anybody really minding. But given the uncertainty of this future and who's going to end up in power there, including the possibility of some extremists that presumably are hostile to the West and to Israel, it seems like a pretty big gamble on the part of the Israelis to roll the dice and remove Assad and kind of let this power vacuum exist in which anyone can sort of emerge as the powerful faction. Do you think that risk was worth it from an Israeli perspective?

JM: Well, the Israeli policy in the Middle East, I believe, for a long time now has been to do everything they can to break apart states, to break apart Iran, to break apart Iraq, to break

apart Syria. They want [inaudible] states, or if the states remain intact, states like Syria remain intact, they want lots of conflict to take place inside of those states. They want them to be dysfunctional states. And you can see where from Israel's point of view that makes sense. That's what their hoping economic sanctions will do to Iran. Wreck the government, you'll get regime change, you'll have all sorts of movements towards independence among people in places like Balochistan and so forth and so on. So I think the Israelis want to do everything they can to wreck all of their neighbours because they believe that will enhance their security. So they're very happy to see what happened in Syria. You want to remember, Syria was not a direct military threat to Israel. It was important because it was a conduit for arms going from Iran to Hezbollah. But Syria was not a serious threat. But the Israelis wanted to do everything they could to wreck Syria. And by the way, you see this in the clean break study from the mid 1990s that a number of neocons did for, I think, Prime Minister Netanyahu at the time. So I'm not surprised as to how the Israelis are thinking about this. I would note, by the way, that although Netanyahu claimed responsibility, principal responsibility, for toppling Assad, I think it was the Turks and the Americans who did all the heavy lifting. I think the Israelis were of tertiary importance here. As I said before, I think American sanctions and the fact that the United States controls almost all of Syrian oil, that those two factors work together to throttle the Syrian economy and hollow out its army. So I think we and the Turks were in charge of bringing Assad down.

GG: I have a couple more questions about Ukraine and then China. But before we leave this region, I just want to ask you, given that there is a temporary halt of bombings and killings and shelling inside Gaza, we're starting to see a kind of comprehensive view of the wreckage and the carnage and the destruction that has taken place in Gaza – a lot of drone footage, you have aid groups now entering, you have the testimony of various doctors showing what happens in hospitals, showing the amount of death that has been unaccounted for, including under the rubble – you have been someone who has been extremely emphatic and vocal about the extraordinary nature of the criminality and complete disregard for human life and the laws of war inside Gaza, but do you feel like, in terms of the historical record and the documentation of what really has gone on there, that we've only gotten a very incomplete picture thus far of what has taken place and that once the real truth starts to emerge, do you have hope that the world will even more fully embrace the extremity of what Israel has done in Gaza?

JM: Exactly. That's exactly my thinking. I think once the shooting stops and people begin to take stock of what happened and it's thoroughly documented in a systematic way, it will have devastating consequences for Israel's reputation and its standing in the world. And I think the same thing is true with the United States because it's very important to emphasise that the United States was complicit in this genocide. The Israelis could have never done this without full American support. But you want to remember, Glenn, that the Israelis said a number of remarkable things about destroying Gaza and killing Gazans and starving them to death and so forth and so on that are recorded. We have evidence of this. All you have to do is look at the brief that the South African government sent to the International Court of Justice two Decembers ago. It's really quite remarkable what the Israelis were saying about what they

wanted to do to the Palestinians. They sounded like Nazi leaders talking about what they wanted to do with Jews. And then furthermore, you have all these examples of Israeli soldiers filming themselves, doing terrible things to the Palestinians, and then boasting about it and posting videos of what they were doing or pictures of what they were doing online. So this is, my opinion is a thoroughly documented genocide. And with regard to intent, which you, of course, have to prove, if you're going to make the case that the Israelis executed a genocide, there's just a lot of rhetoric from Israeli leaders that certainly sounds to me like intention to murder huge numbers of Palestinians in Gaza. But anyway, fortunately, we have a ceasefire now, but at some point, there's going to be a long term ceasefire. And lots of people are going to take stock of what happened here. And the Israelis are going to go to great lengths to try to control the discourse, and they'll do it through the lobby. You see this happening all the time in the United States. But there are limits to how much they can control the discourse at this point. And again, there are just so many brute facts out there that support the genocide narrative that I think enormous damage will be done to Israel and enormous damage will be done to the United States in terms of their reputation.

GG: Yeah, I don't know if you saw that here in Brazil, there's a new organisation globally, based in Brussels, that is devoted to keeping dossiers on the IDF soldiers who have posted the evidence of their war crimes, blowing up residential neighbourhoods for no reason, very statistically and cruelly, under their names under their own accounts, and they track where they go, and one of the IDF soldiers who had posted a lot of horrific content about what he and his platoon did in Gaza, came to Brazil to vacation and this group petitioned a court and convinced a federal judge to order him detained and investigated on the ground that Brazil has not just the right, but the duty under the Rome statute and as a member of the ICC to arrest war criminals found on their soil. And that court order was issued and before they could find him, someone leaked it to Israel, either the police or the military, and they had to smuggle the soldier out. And now the IDF is issuing guidelines about how IDF soldiers have to be very careful about where they're travelling in the world. And it's just kind of ironic because Brazil, of course, was a favourite destination of Nazi war criminals after World War Two and so it has a very strong symbolic impact. And the more that starts to happen, I think the rogue status of Israel and the soldiers who have carried out these atrocities becomes even more emphasised in a way that for Israel and its standing in the world is kind of extraordinary. So I think there's going to be a lot more of that unfolding as the evidence now emerges as well. Let me ask you about Ukraine.

Sometimes I laugh because it is now not just common but essentially obligatory in European capitals, in the Western press to admit what for so long was prohibited to say which is that Ukraine has no chance to win the war against Russia because simply on size grounds alone the Ukrainians can never find the people necessary to fight against the Russian army. Eventually Russia will win. Ukraine will have to concede territory as part of the solution that everybody knows is coming. This is something that you've been saying for as long as I've been talking to you about this war that got you put on all sorts of lists as a Russian propagandist and the like and now suddenly it becomes consensus. That happens over and over, what becomes taboo becomes consensus and nobody ever admits that transformation.

But there seems to be finally a recognition except among a few crazy extremists in Europe that this war has to come to a negotiated end. The Russians are going to end up with some kind of a territory. How do you see this negotiation with Trump now in the picture proceeding and do you have hope that there will be an agreement sooner rather than later?

JM: Well the question, Glenn, that we really care about is whether you can get a negotiated agreement that leads to a meaningful peace agreement or are you going to end up with a frozen conflict, an armistice where you know the fighting stops and there's an agreement not to start it up but there's no meaningful peace agreement. The question is what are you going to get? In my opinion and I hope that I'm wrong here you're not going to get a meaningful peace agreement and you're not going to get a meaningful peace agreement because I think it's impossible for Trump to accept the two basic conditions that Putin insists on. One is Putin says the West and Ukraine both have to recognise the annexation not only of Crimea but of the four eastern oblasts that the Russians have now annexed. So we have to recognise that as a permanent feature of international politics. And second we have to agree that Ukraine will never be in NATO. It will be a genuinely neutral country so it can't even be a de facto member of NATO which is what it has been in recent years. I think it's almost impossible for Trump to accept those two conditions. And if he were to accept those two conditions which the Russians insist on then Trump would face a tremendous backlash in the West especially in the United States but also a tremendous backlash in Ukraine.

GG: And in his own party, and in his own party.

JM: Absolutely, absolutely. But this is the deal that the Russians insist on. You want to remember, Glenn, that you have to think about what caused this war to think smartly about how to end it and there are two views as to what caused the war. One is the view that you and I share which is that NATO expansion into Ukraine was the principle cause. The other view is that Putin is an imperialist who is bent on creating a greater Russia and then conquering territory in Eastern Europe and maybe even in Western Europe. He's an imperialist. Well, if you believe that he's an imperialist, he's just interested in conquering territory, you can work out a bargain with him because there's always room for him to recognise that he can't conquer any more territory, he's got quite a bit and just settle with the territory you've conquered. That's consistent with the argument that this war was an imperial war. If you believe that this war was all about NATO and that Ukraine and NATO was an existential threat that had to be dealt with, then the only way you can settle the war is by agreeing to the fact that Ukraine will never become part of NATO. And we are up to this point incapable of acknowledging that line of argument. We just say Ukraine will be part of NATO. And as long as we insist that Ukraine will become part of NATO, the Russians are going to continue to push forward. They have no choice because they believe that Ukraine and NATO is an existential threat. The problem we face in the West is hardly anybody believes that Ukraine and NATO was the cause of this war. Therefore, they think we don't have to acknowledge that to settle this, we have to declare that Ukraine will be a neutral state. And as long as we don't accept Ukrainian neutrality, there's no way to shut this one down short of a frozen conflict.

GG: The West in general is incapable, I think, of believing that it contributes in any way to

the start and outbreak of wars, that it's always just the West who's the innocent victim and whatever country we happen to be against has turned psychotic or aggressive and we're there to protect the world from decent things. And it's a very ingrained propagandistic belief that I think is very difficult to overcome in any specific case. And here in particular, the propaganda was so relentless and intense about the start of the war, about why it happened, that I think you're right, it's almost impossible to ever uproot that. And therefore, an agreement that requires that does seem unlikely. But the question then is, there does seem to be a loss of will, not just in the West, but also now in Ukraine. Zelensky seems to want to deal as well. So if you're saying that it's unlikely for the reasons you laid out that I agree with that a permanent peace, a real peace deal is impossible, is there something short of that that will freeze hostilities, but is it really a real peace deal that you expect or think is possible?

JM: No, you're not going to get a real peace deal. You'll get a frozen conflict. At some point, the Ukrainians will not be able to continue the fight. The Russians steamroller will have conquered enough territory. Ukraine will be so weak, will have lost so many people, that you'll get a frozen conflict. The problem with a frozen conflict is that it may heat up again. And you can imagine all sorts of scenarios where it will heat up. As I like to emphasise, it's important to note that once you get a frozen conflict, the Ukrainians will do everything they can to undermine Russia's position in the areas of Ukraine that it controls. The West, especially the United States, will do everything it can to undermine Russia. And the Russians, for their part, will do everything they can to interfere in Ukrainian politics and maintain Ukraine as a dysfunctional, rogue state. The Russians will go to great lengths to sow trouble in Europe among the various NATO countries. The Russians will go to great lengths to undermine transatlantic relations. So you're going to have poisonous relations between Russia on one hand and Ukraine and the West on the other hand for as far as the eye can see. This is what happens if you get a frozen conflict. If you were to get a genuine peace agreement, this would not be the case. But as I was saying, I do not see how you get a genuine peace agreement. Because it would require Ukraine and the West to recognise Russian conquests up to now, number one. And number two, agree to a neutral Ukraine. And I don't see that happening. And absent that happening, you're going to have a frozen conflict with poisonous relations between the two sides. And Glenn, if I can take this a step further, you want to understand that superimposed on that frozen conflict in Ukraine are six flashpoints in Eastern Europe that could blow up in our face. One is the Arctic, two is the Baltic, three is Belarus, four is Kaliningrad, five is Moldova, and six is the Black Sea. These are all potential flashpoints for trouble between the West and Russia. And we should be worried about that greatly because those flashpoints will exist in this poisonous political environment.

GG: Again, Western elites seem very unworried about escalatory risks. And from the beginning, that has been shocking and evident at the same time. Let me just ask you the final question about a foreign country, about China and US relations with China under Trump. There are signs that there are paths to more communication, more cooperation. China is sending its highest level government official ever; it's the Vice President sent to Trump's inauguration. Trump has said he wants to visit China in the first hundred days. He often speaks about President Xi with a lot of affection and a lot of respect. There's clearly going to

be economic competition and tariffs of the kind that we saw in the first administration. But it seems like Trump has zero interest in confronting China militarily, although a lot of people surrounding him in that administration have a very different view. What do you expect in a very general way? It's obviously a very complicated topic. I know you've been in China and you get rockstar treatment there for reasons I want to talk about some other time. So it's a country that you have become very, very well acquainted with. What do you see as the prospects of a better relationship between the two countries now that Trump is president?

JM: I initially think, I'm not fully confident, but I think that relations between the United States and China under Trump will be quite good. And there are two reasons for that. First, Trump is not a warmonger. He's surrounded by warmongers in his own party and certainly in the Democratic Party. But Trump is just not interested in starting wars. He wants to do deals. He behaves like a tough guy, but he behaves like a tough guy in the context of doing deals. He doesn't want to start wars. I don't think he wants a war with China, or with Iran for that matter, or anybody else. So that's point one. Point two is, because we are bogged down in the Middle East, and because we are bogged down in Ukraine, and there's no sign we're getting out of those two messes anytime soon, the last thing Trump needs is a conflict in East Asia. So he has a deep-seated interest in doing everything he can to ameliorate tensions between China and the United States. You can play hardball at the economic level, but God forbid you get a war in the South China Sea or over Taiwan. This is the last thing that Trump needs, given where we are in Ukraine and given where we are in the Middle East, and also just given the fact that he's not a warmonger. So I wouldn't be surprised if relations between the United States and China are actually reasonably cordial. I mean, there'll be a security competition there, but it may be the case that it's a low-grade security competition because of these two sets of factors that I just described.

GG: Before I let you go, I just want to ask you about this last issue, which is, as you probably saw, Harvard settled two lawsuits this week where students had alleged that Harvard had taken insufficient steps to protect them from the dangers of anti-Semitism, and as part of that settlement, they agreed to adopt the radically expanded definition of anti-Semitism that the House of Representatives last year also voted to implement as part of anti-discrimination law in the educational context, whereby it's a definition that Israel has pushed for and created that includes very concrete examples of things that if you say you are now guilty formally of hate speech and anti-Semitism, including some things that you said in this very discussion with me, such as comparing the Israeli government and its actions in any way to anything that the Nazis have done, that's something that you've done, it prohibits people from talking about Israel being a racist entity, even though you can say that about any other country. A whole long list of things that you're no longer allowed to say, that certain Jewish individuals might have greater loyalty to Israel than the United States, that's banned, too, even though it's obviously so true about certain people. And we're talking here about academia, the place where free thought and free discourse is most supposed to thrive, that's the reason why people have tenure and the like, and there's clearly an attempt, and I think it goes back to that example that you made of that fear that the Israelis have of what happened to South Africa, where a lot of the activism was centred on college campuses, that was sort of a cause of that

generation and college campuses, and they decided that it was crucial to curb political speech inside the United States, and on campuses specifically, when it comes to criticism of Israel. And it seems to me like they're really succeeding, and this seems to me as well to be a trend that Trump and his entire administration support. Is this something that, as somebody who is an academic, who has spent your adult life inside academic institutions, is it of concern to you?

JM: Absolutely. I mean, I think almost all academics think that what's happened with this Harvard case is disastrous, it's terrible. And I'm sort of an extremist on free speech, I'm like you on this issue, and I'm appalled at what's going on here. The broad definition of anti-Semitism is ridiculous, right? Anybody who criticises Israel in a serious way turns out to be an anti-Semite, according to this definition. We should be able to criticise Israel as we see fit, and we ought to be able to criticise the United States as we see fit. What happened to free speech here? These are elite universities, places like Harvard. I mean, this should not be happening. But you see what's happening here, Glenn, this is the lobby that's driving this. It's just very important to understand that. This is pressure from donors that forced the administration, the Harvard administration, to settle this case. But what's going on here is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to defend Israel. This gets back to our earlier discussion about what the historical record is going to say moving forward about what Israel did. And the lobby is now in a position where it's becoming incredibly difficult to defend Israel. The mask is off, so they're playing hardball politics, or what I like to call smashmouth politics. And this is an example of it. And universities are very dangerous places from the point of view of the lobby because you have freedom of speech. And when you have freedom of speech, people are free to criticise Israel. And the lobby wants to stop that. It's just like they stopped these protests. You had all these protests were basically students, many of whom were Jewish – that should be underlined, three times – many of these students were Jewish who were protesting against what the Israelis are doing in Gaza. And instead of it being treated, or all these cases being treated as protests against the genocide, it got turned into cases of anti-Semitism. These were all just a bunch of anti-Semites coming out and saying hateful things about Jews in Israel because they're anti-Semites. And that's the picture that the lobby has worked hard to portray in the United States. It bears no resemblance to reality. But this is what the lobby has to do at this point in time. You just want to ask yourself the question moving forward: How is the lobby going to deal with the fact that what has just happened in genocide has been so thoroughly documented, and people are going to comment on it? And that you have a ruling by the ICJ about genocide in January of 2024, and a ruling from the ICC that led to arrest warrants for the Israeli prime minister and former defence minister. How are they going to deal with all these things? How are they going to deal with the fact that Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have declared in big, lengthy studies that what is happening in Gaza is a genocide? This is a huge problem. So what they're doing is they're in overdrive to crack down. And they are beginning to thwart free speech. That's what's going on here.

GG: It's amazing that the same people who have spent the last decade waving the banner of free speech, decrying censorship, complaining about the tactic of accusing all your enemies

of being bigots and racists and whatever as a way of shutting down free debate are now completely behind this crackdown. And it would be one thing to lose our core free speech rights because our own government and our own country has decided that we are too much of a crisis to permit free speech, but to lose our free speech rights because some foreign country on the other side of the world is insisting that they not be criticised within the United States is something that is appalling and remarkable to watch, and yet it's exactly what's happening and these institutions, one after the next, are acquiescing to it under great pressure. And it's hard to overstate how threatening it is.

JM: Exactly. I just add one final point to this. Jews have benefited enormously from living in a liberal society. Liberalism is something that Jews cherish because it has protected them in all sorts of ways. But what's happening here is you're threatening basic liberal values. You're going after freedom of speech. It's one of the core liberal values that all Jews should be working overtime to protect. But because of Israel and because of its atrocious behaviour, you have a large slice of Jews, and I'm not saying all Jews here by any means, but you do have a large slice of Jews who are willing to sacrifice freedom of speech to protect Israel. This, in my opinion, is not in the interest of Jews, not to mention Americans in general.

GG: Yeah, it's something that needs to be said and said loudly and said emphatically. And I'm very grateful that you are one of the people who not only now, but for a long time, have been willing to stand up on these issues despite the risk and the attacks and the cost that they constantly invoke. And in addition, it's always great to speak with you more broadly about issues because of the perspective that you bring and the way you express yourself. I'm always grateful for your time, and it's great to see you. And we'll have you back on shortly, as always.

JM: Thank you, Glenn. It's my pleasure being here. Always fun to talk to you.

GG: Absolutely. Feel the same way. Talk to you soon.

END

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