

NOVEMBER 2023 SPEAKER AMNON ZOHAR- THE MIDDLE EAST

Amnon started with a compliment for us: "I'm a little bit intimidated in the company of so many beautiful women."

Amnon is a retired hi-tech entrepreneur, now a lecturer, author, and speaker on global affairs focusing on the Middle East. He told us: "Shortly after I was booked on April 24 to speak to you in November, I prepared an optimistic talk saying the possibility of a Middle East Union of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel was a beacon of hope and prosperity. I threw it away October 7 when the Israel-Hamas war started and decided to focus on why the war happened and what's next. It's complicated."

His explanation of "why" began with a timeline since the Six Day War in 1967 in which Israel captured the Gaza Strip from Egypt, East Jerusalem and the West Bank from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005 and Hamas took over in 2006 and 2007. (Hamas is an Arabic acronym for its official Arabic name meaning in English "Islamic Resistance Movement.") Amnon said: "In September 2022 Israel's then prime minister Yair Lapid put forward what in my opinion was the best offer possible for a two-state solution to Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas. He drew a map on a piece of paper with Palestinian Authority letterhead." Nothing came of it because Lapid was defeated November 1, 2022 by Benjamin Netanyahu, opposed to a two-state solution. Amnon said: "There are many political parties in Israel and no party gets a majority. A coalition has to be formed. Netanyahu, who'd been centre right, aligned with the far right "Jewish Power" party which has no interest whatever in resolving the Palestinian issue. Netanyahu polarized and divided Israel over his plan to give his government the power to override the Supreme Court. Critics said this would end Israel being a democracy, the only one in the Middle East. The Israel Defence Force warned Netanyahu and the intelligence services that the turmoil over his plan was making Israel vulnerable, but they didn't listen. The result was Israel's worst military disaster since the 1973 Yom Kippur War."

Amnon also spoke about the role of Iran. "Hamas is a proxy for Iran which doesn't want normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Iran holds the cards to turn the region into Armageddon." He added, "Israel is winning militarily but has lost the information war."

His vision for what happens next: "Hamas no longer in Gaza. Israel not occupying Gaza. An interim regional government with representation from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, maybe Israel, to transition Gaza into a civil society."

He ended as he'd started: "So many beautiful women here."

Susan Goldenberg