# Transcript

Speaker 1

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the second of our Thursday evening Distinguished Speaker Series in the Middle East Center. My name is Eugene Rogan, and as director of the Center, it's a great pleasure to see all of you here for Marwan Bishara's book talk. Now, to the best of my knowledge, the relationship with Marwan goes back almost exactly 25 years to the day when we hosted him back then in the Kerdar building to present which was one of your first books, Palestine, Israel, Peace or Apartheid. And the funny thing is, and I'll spare you them now, but I still have my notes from his seminar from then tucked into the middle of the book and reviewing what he said then and where we are today. It's just depressing to realize how little progress has been made to resolve that fundamental question of whether between Israel and Palestine there should be peace for apartheid. Marwan went on to write embedded America, Israel and the war on terror in 2004, which was his contribution to the debates that surrounded America's response to the events of 9-11, which I hasten to add was just a month before you came here in October of 2001, 9-11, 2001. And then The Invisible Arab, The Promise and Peril of the Arab Revolution came out in 2012, which was your observations on the Arab Spring, and the counter-revolution. What I would say is that Madwan has been bringing out books that address the major turning points in the 21st century history of the Middle East and the Arab world in particular. And so he has done for us again this year with his most recent book, 12 Days That Shook the Middle East, origins of the genocide. So Marwan will start with some first reflections. He and I will begin a conversation about 45 to 50 minutes after we start. I will then rein in my enthusiasm and open the floor to you and your questions. And the last thing to say is we have a lot of copies of the book. which will be available to you after this session. And there are hardbacks, there are paperbacks. The holidays are soon upon us. You will all be thinking about what to get your aunt and uncle for Christmas and New Year. And so I just wanted to remind you that this would be a great opportunity to get something special for all those loved ones. And all proceeds go to the Galilee Foundation. So all proceeds of the book go to advancing the charitable causes of the Galilee Foundation, which as no doubt you all know, is a leading organization for channeling funding into providing education for Palestinian citizens of Israel. Without further ado, will you join me in welcoming, after 25 years and many times in between, the wonderful Marwan Bishara?

Speaker 2

Thank you, Eugene. I could probably spend the whole evening talking about Eugene, but it's too embarrassing and I don't want to embarrass him or embarrass myself. I just

want to say this is one man that I know, what a great scholar, historian, and a nice friend he is. These qualities usually don't find him very much nowadays in universities. So I'm not going to talk about the book today. We will discuss the book. We'll discuss it with you and with Eugene. But I'm getting tired of the book, to be honest. I've already moved on to the next one. It just came out. I know it's just too much trouble. Once it's out, you need to move on. And I've moved on already. I'm working on my next one. And this is the second time I was telling Eugene earlier, this is the second time I actually prepared a speech and read it. I'm going to actually read it for you. And you're going to have to go through it with me. I'm not sure I'm good at it, but I decided this time it was too much fun to write it, so here it is. If at one point you start going before me, I will stop and we want another phase. Anyway, Here we go. After I finished the first draft of my book, 12 Days That Shook the Middle East, a leading scholar whom I had asked to read the manuscript made an important observation. Israeli public opinion during the Gaza War deserved more attention. He was right. I had shown how firmly the country's Jewish population stood behind the war. I had also shown how enthusiastically Israelis rallied behind Netanyahu's war policies. This remained true even when a majority of Israelis thought poorly of him as a leader who had let him down, especially on October 7th. For decades, Israelis had remained silent, indifferent, or complicit in the systematic repression of the Palestinians. Yet when October 7 came, they were shocked, shaken, and humiliated. They blamed everybody but themselves. Most wanted the Prime Minister gone. Nevertheless, they rallied to his call for an almighty revenge. A reinforced sense of tribal solidarity brought them together. Israelis were relieved when former top generals joined the war cabinet, established 5 days into the war with US blessings. The 2 former IDF chiefs of staff, Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, lent Netanyahu much-needed support. when he needed it most. Gantz had led the 2014 Gaza War, if you remember. He's the one who wanted to bomb it back to the Stone Age. He later led the Blue and White Party, which beat Likud in the 2019 elections, to win the highest number of Knesset seats. Isencard succeeded Gantz as Chief of Staff. He had overseen A brutal military response to the Gazans' peaceful largely peaceful great march of return in 2018. Like Gantz in the 2019 elections, Eisenkot has since emerged as a leading political contender. I'm sure you've all heard of him. His recently established party, Yashar, meaning straight, has been polling strongly, even Netanyahu's the coup. I will return to Netanyahu with that general and the elections shortly, but first I want to focus on the public mood and the sentiment of the electorate, which has puzzled me greatly since my friend nagged me to dig deeper. I'm going to call it the happiness puzzle. Despite the bloody surprise of October 7, the rockets, the missile attacks, the grinding war, the economic difficulties, the growing international isolation, Israel has ranked among the world's 10 happiest countries. According to the World Happiness Report, Israel ranked in the top 10 in 2026. as well as in each of the previous years, 2002, 2003, 2023, 2024, and 2025. It shares this privilege, a privilege list with the Scandinavian countries, along with Switzerland and Costa Rica. The first, as you know, is military

neutral, and the 2nd has no army. Israel, by contrast, is a garrison state, a state of perpetual war. As the Gaza war roared and genocide showed its ugly face, it seems like the Israelis were super pleased with themselves. Those under 25 ranked the third happiest in the world. Let that sink in. If the surveys are conducted a year or two before publication, The 2020 since ranking suggests that Israelis remained remarkably satisfied while the war continued. They felt rather good in the shadow of genocide and happier than most others. But I am puzzled by more than Israeli public sentiment during the bloody war. I am stupefied by the fact that Israelis have long felt contended while occupying, besieging, and dispossessing millions of Palestinians. This is not a new phenomenon. Since the World Happiness Report was first published in 2012, Israeli happiness has risen from the top 20 to the top 10. Something is seriously wrong with happiness, my scholar friend. remarked sarcastically when I shared the discovery. Indeed, he's right. The Finns, who topped the list many years, have not always been happy about their country's reported happiness. One academic specializing in wellness observed rather sardonically that When Finland was declared the happiest country in the world, Finns reacted as they had to other international rankings. They criticized the methodology, they questioned the conclusions, and they pointed to the shortcomings of the Finnish society. After all, Finland ranked among the Western countries with the highest prevalence of unipolar depressive disorders. Nordic countries rank highly in terms of satisfaction, yet they do not rank as highly in terms of positive emotions. But let's get back to Israel. If, as the World Happiness report stipulates, trust in state institutions and society is key to happiness or satisfaction, how do we explain the results of local Israeli polls. Consider that 2026, again, 2026 poll finding from the Institute for National Security Studies and the Israel Democracy Institute. These are two of the most reputable institutes in Israel. They reveal A striking contradiction. Trust in government remains low. at 18 to 26%. Trust in the Knesset starts at just 13 to 15%. Trust in political parties is even lower than that. Worse, 63% of the public believes that solidarity within the Israeli society is either absent or exists only to a limited extent. Meanwhile, the economy has been hit by the war. The cost of goods and services has risen sharply. Prices are 34% higher in Israel than in the OECD average. Okay, so if neither trust in the state institutions nor social solidarity explains Israel's glee, What does? Why are Israelis so damn happy? Even in the shadow of occupation, war and genocide. It can't simply be the sheerfulness of Jewish Israelis as I have long known them, having been born and raised in Israel. There are more, if the expression in French, than even the French. The indicators tell a different story. Worry, sadness, and anger, the negative emotions experienced by the population have risen shortly. Israel's ranking in negative emotions jumped from place before the war to 39th place. And in terms of the corruption percentage index, Israel fell to 107th place compared to the 80th in 2021. There's also the human cost of the war inside the military itself. For example, the Israeli military recorded a 40% increase in PTSD cases after September 2023 and predicts that could rise to 180% by 2028. By the end of 2025, more than 85,000 Israeli

soldiers were receiving treatment for psychological disorders linked to the war. So again, What is really going on in Israel? Why the glee? Is it because Israelis refuse to watch or acknowledge the suffering they're causing? Out of sight, out of mind? One poll shows that 64% of Israelis do not want coverage of Gaza suffering on Israeli television. Or is it the explanation simpler? Do Israelis believe that massive force is necessary regardless of the suffering it causes? If they haven't watched, they must have heard that Israel has killed 10s of thousands of people in Gaza, including more than 20,000 children. Their own military commanders boast of having killed as many. Politicians openly threatened more Nakbas, repetition of the catastrophe of 1948 when roughly three-quarters of the Palestinian population was dispossessed and displaced. Israeli officials also boast of not allowing international law to influence military decisions, decisions that are in many instances illegal. Jewish Israelis justify the atrocities committed in Gaza by blaming Palestinians at large. Apparently, that includes the children. As 1 centrist Knesset member, a woman, a mother of two, the children have brought it upon themselves in Gaza, she said. The argument is familiar. Israel has no choice in Bira, as they say, but to defend itself. Read, defend its occupation. And it may use whatever means necessary to accomplish it. Worse, according to a 2025 Haarids poll, now get this, is really gets even uglier. According to the 2025 Haartz poll, 82% of Jewish Israelis support expelling all Palestinians from Gaza. Let me repeat. In 2025 Haartz poll, 82% of Jewish Israelis support expelling all Palestinians from Gaza. It gets even worse. 56% even support expelling Palestinian citizens of Israel in the one and only democracy in the Middle East. These are the indigenous people of the land. Does that or would that make Israeli happy? Really? It probably will be Jesus a growing fanatical and fascist segment of the population. This is a constituency that thrives on violence and supports radical military solutions to the Palestinian problem. We know that. There's also religious dimension, and extremist Jewish messianic groups interpret the escalating conflict in the Holy Land as fulfillment of biblical end of times prophecies. For them, catastrophe can be a promise. Violence can be a sign of divine purpose. This helps justify apocalyptical policies despite their devastating human consequences. Now, for others, war itself may be a source of meaning. There was a book titled War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning. The leading Israeli military historian Martin Van Gruffel He's originally Dutch. The leading Israeli military historian Martin Van Grafeld ended his book, The Transformation of War, with a striking observation. Get this, this is really almost funny. One important way in which man can attain joy, freedom, happiness, even delirium and ecstasy is by not staying home with wife and family, even to the point where often enough they are all too happy to give up their nearest and dearest in favor of war. War can become more than a mean to an end. It can become an end itself. Yet Israel seems unmoved by the negative consequences of its constant pursuit of war. Its international isolation has deepened, its reputation has deteriorated. It has increasingly become a pariah state despite doubling its Hasbara budget, public relations. According to a new report by the Alliance of Democracies, this

just came out this week, Israel is the most disliked country in the world today. It is followed by countries such as Afghanistan, North Korea, and Iran. This cannot make Israelis happy now. Can it? Could it? In certain ways, Israel is a state like no other. Chutzpah is central to the national character. Familiar with the concept chutzpah? It means audacity, impertinence, and shamelessness all at once. Chutzpah allows Israel to pride itself on being insolent, on standing up to a world that it claims hates us. Such claims allow Israel to act without shame, without guilt, without feeling obliged to explain itself. That can definitely be liberating. At the heart of this chutzpah lies Israel's pride and prejudice. And prejudice. It's just a good title. It actually works here. At the heart of the chutzpah lies Israel's pride and prejudice. the IDF, the Israel Defense Forces, the army and the nation. While Israelis do not trust the government or parliament, they do trust their military and security forces. As Trump would say, Jewish Israelis adore their army. Many regard military service as a sacred and noble act. The polls show that the idea of popularity consistently sits in the upper 70s among all Israelis. This is roughly three times the level of trust in government. Among Israeli Jews, trust approximately is 100%, if you take away the Palestinians in Israel. Moreover, a majority of Israeli Jews report a high or moderate sense of personal and national security. This contrasts with the low sense of personal security reported by fellow Palestinian citizens. Okay, so let's just pause here. We need to address the love and this love and trust Israelis have for their army. We also need to consider its central role in the country's society and political system. The idea is more than a security shield. In many respects, it's the backbone of the country. There's a famous description of Prussia as an army with a country rather than a country with an army. I think the same characterization has often been applied to Israel. Israel's critics invoke it frequently, but it's not a description from which the country itself entirely shies away. Since 1948, the IDF has served as a melting pot for the country's diverse population of immigrants and ethnic groups and even I would say social and economic classes. The numbers speak for themselves. In 2023, a year before the current wars, Israel spent $23.4 billion on its military. That made it the world's second highest military spender per capita. The IDF is Israel's largest employer with 170,000 active personnel. It occupies A commanding position in the economy surrounded by a thriving ecosystem of high-tech defense industries, the pride of the Israeli economy. Then there are another 465,000 reservists. These are citizens who exchange their civilian lives for military duties for several weeks every year. Put all this together and the Adaif becomes more than an institution. It becomes a home, away from home for many Israelis. This pervasive presence has given the IDF and its leadership a unique place in Israel society. The consequences extend far beyond defense. In his book, Fortress Israel, the inside story of military elites who run the country and why they can't make peace Patrick Tyler documents how a powerful military elite has long helped steer Israel. Its imprint on national policy has helped entrench a fortress mentality, strength and deterrence take priority over diplomacy and compromise, he argues. The result is a political culture in which peace has remained

elusive. even incompatible with the country's military first ethos. The logic is simple. The more accustomed a society becomes to using force, the more it comes to see the world through the military lens. Problems become threats, violence becomes the response. It's the old, you know, hammer and nail adage. You've heard it a million times, I'm sure. When all you have is a hammer, everything starts looking like a nail. General Gantz once put the Israeli mindset bluntly. We definitely live with our sword, he said. I don't think our children or grandchildren won't be soldiers. We must make effort to try not to live by the sword, but we will always be with the sword. There it is. The sword is both the answer and the problem. The mindset fosters a self-perpetuating cycle. The normalization of force leads to its content reapplication. Each new conflict reinforces the belief that the next one will require even more force. A global arms market helps sustain the cycle. Many countries, including enemies, want to buy Israel's weaponry and security expertise. The Israeli military-industrial complex thus thrives on more than the control of Palestinian Arabs. The cycle is not only military, it's economic, it's political, and it's deeply embedded in the country's identity. It's not only Israelis who love the military. The United States, like most Israelis, regard the idea as one of the region's most competent state institutions. Decades of military to military ties have reinforced their relationship. So have strategic overlap and 10s, in fact hundreds of billions of dollars in US military aid. Together they have constructed A fortress of complicity in the Middle East. Nearly every Israeli general has spent time training in the United States. They speak the Pentagon language fluently. American officials often describe them as pragmatic and disciplined. In the context of the Gaza war, this may simply mean that they know how to kill without tweeting about it. Then there is the ultimate Orwellian label, moderates. Washington loves that word. It's a code for they bomb with precision and return our calls. But moderates is definitely a stretch. These generals are not diplomats in fatigues. They are efficient managers of military dominance. Schooled in occupation and refined in Palestinian siege. They do not shy away from bloodshed. They simply look professional and they make sure that the press is appropriately handled. This relationship reinforces the idea of position at the center of the Israeli society. It also helps explain a deeper political paradox. Israelis may not distrust the government. They may blame Netanyahu for October 7. They may demand accountability. Yet, they continue to place extraordinary faith in the military establishment. They can reject the politicians without questioning the military doctrine and national assumptions that he represents. This is why generals remain such powerful political figures in Israel. They promise to restore competence and discipline. They do so without challenging the security consensus that underpins the country's political order. Their authority derives from the very institutions that has come to define Israel's national identity. As Netanyahu's political fortunes weaken, Gadi Isenkard offers precisely that combination. A different style of leadership, but no fundamental break with Israel's military and security consensus. The question is whether replacing the fanatic politician with the army general will change the country's policies. or simply

make the pursuit more disciplined and politically palatable. Elections in the shadow of genocide is where we are today less than a week before the elections. It is deja vu all over again in the Israeli politics. But there are a few twists. Since the 1990s, Opposition to Netanyahu has repeatedly rallied around former generals turned politicians. From Yitzhak Rabin to Ehud Barak to Benny Gantz, the pattern has been remarkably consistent. When political leaders, when political leadership loses public confidence, the generals appear. He promises to restore order, competence, and security. Now, Isencard hopes to repeat that pattern. Despite Trump's endorsement of Netanyahu, an exception to the rule among American presidents. But the question is not merely whether he can defeat Netanyahu or assemble A governing coalition. It's whether his victory would change Israel's relationship with the Palestinians or simply change the management of that relationship. Eisenkat joined Netanyahu's wartime cabinet alongside Gantz after October 7, 2023 and through the spring of 2024. He has since become one of Netanyahu's fiercest critics. He opposes Netanyahu's dependence on the religious far right. He opposes the judicial overhaul. He also opposes Netanyahu's resistance to an independent state commission of inquiry. into the security failures of October 7. Like his predecessor, Isengard promises more competent government, institutional accountability, and less combustible relationship with Israel state institutions like the Supreme Court. Yet on Palestine, his position is firmly on the right. According to his own deputy, Matan Gahana, another military man, an air force man. Isencard stands to the right of Likud on the Palestinian question. He opposes Palestinian statehood. He rejects restrictions on the illegal settlement expansion. He wants Israel to maintain its military presence in Gaza and elsewhere until Hamas and other enemies are totally defeated. He may seek to curb the most violent settler excesses that give Israel a bad name, but he has offered no political horizon for ending Israel's domination of the Palestinians. Eisenkot could therefore follow a familiar pattern. He might defeat Netanyahu's Likud in the race for the Knesset seat but failed to assemble a governing coalition. This is particularly likely if he rules out relying on Arab parties, just as guns. Israel could be left in political limbo. Neither camp would be able to secure a majority of seats to form a coalition. A prolonged stalemate with Netanyahu remaining in power until another election is called within months, gives him, meaning Netanyahu, a better chance to win. This leaves the option of a broad national unity government built around shared security priorities. Such an arrangement would be popular among the Israelis, the happy Israelis, but difficult to negotiate. Netanyahu's decision to renege on his power-sharing agreement with Gantz after the 2019 election offers little reassurance to a potential partner. Whether he would accept Eisencot as the head of a national Unity in return for an end to his corruption trial remains to be seen. Either way, such a national security government would be no more than an expanded version of the October 23 war cabinet that managed Gaza's genocidal war. The question for all of us here and everywhere, we, the ones who are on the outside

looking in, what can we, what must be done for Israelis to think and feel differently about the war and the occupation and their own well-being? And thank you.

Speaker 1

But one, thank you so much.