

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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Huckabee: United Nations more interested in self-preservation than getting food into Gaza

In an interview with JI, the U.S. ambassador to Israel pinned the humanitarian issues in Gaza and failure of negotiations on Hamas and the U.N.

By Lahav Harkov

Since his arrival in Israel in April, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee has made his mark as the first evangelical U.S. ambassador to Israel — and possibly the most effusive in his remarks about the Jewish state.

That may be why a leaked letter he wrote to Israeli Interior Minister Moshe Arbel last week, expressing “profound disappointment” that an issue delaying work visas for Christian organizations had gone unresolved and suggesting that Israelis may be treated in kind by the U.S., drew so much attention.

A day after the letter leaked, the ambassador visited Taybeh, a Palestinian village in the West Bank where there had been a fire in a field near a church, writing on X that “desecrating a church, mosque or

synagogue is a crime against humanity and God,” and “I will demand those responsible be held accountable.” With Taybeh church leaders blaming settlers, Huckabee's comments were interpreted in many media accounts as doing the same, though he later clarified that he was not attributing the fire to anyone.

But with the visa issue resolved and the world's attention on the humanitarian situation in Gaza and the latest round of collapsed negotiations for a ceasefire and hostage-release deal, Huckabee was back to standing firmly behind Israel in an interview with Jewish Insider in his office at the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem on Thursday. With an guitar hanging on the wall behind him emblazoned with an American flag and President Donald Trump's slogan “make

America great again,” Huckabee pinned the humanitarian issues in Gaza and failure of negotiations on Hamas and the U.N., and was critical of other Western countries that have come out against Israel, accusing them of emboldening the Gazan terrorist group.

The interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Jewish Insider: There's a lot of pressure on Israel over humanitarian aid in Gaza and claims that residents of Gaza are starving. Israel says that they are letting more food in but no one is distributing it, while much of the world doesn't believe that. I want to ask you: Do you think there is really starvation in Gaza? What is really happening?

Ambassador Mike Huckabee: This very morning, I had a visit from someone

who returned yesterday from three days in Gaza. He firsthand went and saw the [Gaza Humanitarian Foundation] feeding sites, talked to people, not only from the staffing and the distribution, but he talked to people in Gaza ... He came to the conclusion, first of all, that absolute lies that are being told, not only about GHF and what they're doing, but are also being told about the deprivation.

There are clearly people who need food and medicine. That's not a doubt. But the biggest reason that people are not getting the food and medicine they need is that Hamas is doing its best to cause the people to suffer. They want to get the photos of the most disastrous consequences possible.

The photos that I also saw, which were very disturbing but also revealing, [were of] hundreds and hundreds of pallets of food that are sitting out in the sun ready to be distributed, but the U.N. won't move them. Hundreds of trucks filled with food and medicine, and the U.N. claims that they're trying to help. No, they're not. They are as much a part of the problem, if not the biggest part of the problem there is. And this food could be distributed right now, but the U.N. isn't doing it. The NGOs aren't doing it, and the World Food Program isn't doing it, because they just drop it off. Then, basically, they're waiting on Hamas to come and steal it so [the group] can turn around and sell it to the people that ought to be getting it for free. It is a scam.

It is a disgrace and an outrage that the story that is being told is that GHF is killing people, and they're not. They haven't fired one round at anybody ... It's simply not true. It is sadly being reported sometimes because Hamas will release a news story and the Associated Press, CNN, *The Washington Post*, will gobble it up. They'll print it without any verification ... That's what Israel is up against. It's what the U.S. is up against every single day, with really, really horrible misinformation about what's happening.

Jl: Why do you think countries that purport to be friends of Israel and the U.S. — 26 countries signed a letter to Israel about the aid including the U.K., Canada, France — are believing Hamas?

MH: It's hard for me to understand why they would do that without doing a little better job of verifying the information.

If they would, they would have a totally different picture...

The other day there was the story of the 26 countries that came out and did this condemnation of Israel. If you read the news release, it's all about Israel, all about what they haven't done right, and a lot of the things in the story are just untrue. The biggest just shocker of it all, was that there was one brief mention of the fact that the war was started by Hamas on Oct. 7, as a passing reference, without really giving the qualifier that this war should have ended on Oct. the 8th, but Hamas doesn't want it to, and they're doing everything they can to make sure it doesn't...

I've been shocked that very few other nations and even nonprofit organizations have been willing to stand up and help in the distribution of the food through the GHF, because the whole model was based on ... No. 1, get food to people who are hungry, and No. 2, do it in a way that it doesn't get stolen by Hamas. That's been accomplished; over 85 million meals now have been served and continues to operate at almost 2 million meals a day.

It hasn't been perfect. There have been hiccups, but [that happens] when you have that many people coming to a site and trying to get that much food out to people. Heck, you can go to Walmart on Christmas Eve ... and it's bedlam. Sometimes you stand in the long line and sometimes they ran out of what you wanted, but that's true in the most efficient retailer on the planet. This is being done out in the middle of a desert for heaven's sakes, and has really worked pretty doggone good.

Well, we just want people to get the truth and to get the food, but we don't want Hamas to steal it, which is what they have done through the U.N. model, which has been an absolute disaster.

Maybe the U.N. is more interested in preserving the machinery of the U.N. than they are in feeding people. And I know that sounds harsh, but I absolutely am on the record for that, because when I see just thousands of pallets, thousands of tons of food sitting that could be consumed by people, it's sitting there because the U.N. doesn't really have any incentive to go out and actually get it to the people. They can just present that 'We carried X number of

trucks in.' How many people got fed from that? Bigger question is, how many of those trucks or pallets are going to be looted by Hamas, who will then sell it to the people that are hungry?

Jl: Do you think that there's something that Israel needs to be doing differently at this point with regards to humanitarian aid?

MH: Get their message out more strongly. You know, they have a good message about what they're trying to do. They're trying to protect the people who are delivering the food. Food isn't being delivered by the IDF. That was one of the key points; they didn't want the military giving the food, because there's a distrust, and we understand that, so we brought our own contractors in. But you can't give food away in a war zone without having the military who's prosecuting the war involved, at least on the perimeter, so that they can make sure that there's a secure route in and a secure route out ... Israel has a much better story to tell than the world is hearing, and it's very frustrating, especially when so-called allies are attacking Israel and not even really mentioning Hamas.

Jl: Hamas is degraded, but it's still a force in Gaza and it's still holding hostages. We're talking a day after Hamas essentially rejected the temporary ceasefire and hostage deal being offered. But there was talk before that of turning the proposed 60-day ceasefire into a permanent one, even though Hamas has not been eliminated. How does the Trump administration see things going forward?

MH: The president has said repeatedly, without any equivocation, that Hamas can't stay, and they can't govern. ... And frankly, it's the right message. They can't stay, they can't govern. It would be like saying the Nazis can stay in Germany after World War II and have a hand in governing the future; nobody would have thought that was a good idea ... Hamas built tunnels bigger than the London Underground so they could kill Jews. It's a horrible, horrible story, and people need to put the blame where it falls, and that's on Hamas and not on Israel.

Jl: The negotiations seem to have

reached a dead end. What more do you think that could be done to get the hostages home?

MH: If everyone in the world puts enough pressure on Hamas and says it won't be just Israel and the U.S. coming to get you, it'll be the whole world coming to get you. It's like in the movie "Tombstone" and Wyatt Earp says, "I'm coming for you, and hell is coming with me." That's the kind of message that we need to say. The problem is Israel has made concession after concession. They have made offer after offer. The U.S. has intervened time and time and time again and gone to, I don't know how many different talks, meetings and negotiations, but every time you will hear "we're close," we think we're about there, and then Hamas changes all the conditions at the last minute, or just outright rejects them...

[On Wednesday, Hamas] went back to a position that [it] had abandoned in the past. So when there's not a good faith negotiation going on, and then you have to ask: Whoever thought there was going to be? These are the people that murdered pregnant women in front of their families, and that raped women in front of their children. When people do things like that, these aren't people you sit down and work out a negotiation to buy a home from or sell a car to. So, while everybody has hopes that this is going to end and soon, all the hostages returned and Hamas is gone, it's up to Hamas whether or not that's going to happen.

Jl: Do you think the letter from the 26 countries emboldened Hamas to harden its position?

MH: That's the real tragedy. It's not just that they're condemning Israel, but by condemning Israel and barely mentioning Hamas, they're empowering Hamas to just keep hanging on.

There needs to be a collective across-the-whole-globe condemnation of Hamas with this clarity of message that what they've done is evil and holding hostages for nearly 700 days can't be justified under any conditions ... The families who have been put through a living hell over this deserve to be relieved.

Jl: What about the Qataris? Do you think that the U.S. is doing enough to put

pressure on them? It seems that they are doing everything they can to try to stay on President Trump's good side.

MH: One thing they could do — if that's their goal, to be in the president's good graces — would be to be key in bringing this to a resolve. And I hope they do. I hope they use every influence they have, and they truly have some. I mean, they've been housing some of the Hamas leaders since all of this started. And Al Jazeera, which is one of the most despicable propaganda machines in the world, is financed by them...

I'll leave [the details] to the headquarters in Washington, but nobody would be disappointed if [Qatar] did more.

Jl: There's also President Trump's plan to to turn Gaza into a 'riviera.' There has not been a lot of progress. Where do things stand? Is the U.S. asking any countries to accept Gazan refugees?

MH: I think it's more of an Israeli mission to make that decision. What the president has said is U.S. policy is that people who are there who want to leave should be free to leave. They shouldn't be forced to leave and face expulsion, but neither should people be forced to stay. It ought to be an individual, personal decision on the part of the people who are right now living in what is anything less than an ideal circumstance.

Jl: So you're saying the U.S. is not involved in trying to find countries that will accept them?

MH: It's not something that has been shared with me as to being an immediate issue. I know that there is definitely talk that this would be a great opportunity for people to have a fresh start that has been discussed at both the U.S. and Israeli levels. And I think everybody thinks that would be a wonderful thing if people had that option, and if countries were willing to say, "Hey, we'd love to have people come and be part of our labor force and immigrate to our country." But I don't know that there's any specific plans that the U.S. has made on that...

The U.S. took a position several months ago when the president said ... 'We'll just take [Gaza] over. Immediately, within 24 hours, you had four or five Gulf countries saying, "Oh no, no, we want a piece of it. We'll help govern." People who don't understand

the president and how he works probably didn't get it that the whole point was to force people to pony up and get in the game, and that's exactly what happened...

What he does want to do is to see that these people have a chance for a better life, economically, and just from a security standpoint, they're never going to have it under Hamas ... Who runs [Gaza in the future]? Good question. Maybe it comes to the place where there's a number of Middle Eastern countries that come and really make a partnership and a coalition and invest the money to rebuild it and give people an opportunity to have a decent and deserved life.

Jl: There have been terrible clashes and massacres of the Druze minority in Syria in recent weeks. It seems from U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Tom Barrack, who's also envoy to Syria, that the Trump administration still wants to give new Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa a chance. Is that causing friction with Israel, which tried to stop the violence against the Druze with airstrikes?

MH: Right now, the ceasefire has held for two days, which doesn't seem like a lot of time, but in Syrian time, that's a lot of time. There were some horrific things that have happened, especially to the Druze. The Israelis were very bold in standing up for the Druze and showing their support ... literally going in and trying to help them with supplies and standing up assistance in every way they could. I thought it was an admirable thing, because the Druze have stood with Israel.

The head sheikh of the Druze community [Muwaffaq Tarif] was sitting right where you are on Tuesday afternoon. We had a very candid meeting about the situation they faced. They're deeply grateful for Israel's support. It did mean a lot to them that they weren't just left hanging...

I've had several conversations with Ambassador Barrack over the course of the last week and before. It's a fragile situation. Nobody's going to deny that al-Sharaa is not exactly the person the U.S. would have picked ... but he's who we got.

What the president [Trump] did was, I think, bold, but also brilliant, at a time when al-Sharaa realized he doesn't have the

military or economic capacity to make Syria viable. He's got to find a partner. He's like the kid that goes to the prom and doesn't have a date. Somebody's going to go over there and say, "Would you dance with me?" Do we want it to be Iran, Russia, China? Absolutely not. President Trump comes in and says, "You can dance with me, but if you do, terrorism has to go away." We can't have these relationships with bad guys and remilitarize Syria and turn it into another nightmare like Assad. [Al-Sharaa] wisely decided that that was a better partnership than any offer he had. That's where we are now.

Everybody has anxieties about where this could go, but we also are in a place where it could turn the corner, go very well, and we could see normalization between Syria and Israel, and that would have looked really unthinkable two years ago.

JJ: You don't think that the last couple weeks have taken a Syria-Israel agreement off the table?

MH: No, I don't at all. I think it showed some of the challenges that we face. A lot of things happened because of misunderstanding and lack of communication. When [the Syrian military] went south of Damascus with artillery and tanks, it looked like they were getting ready for a military operation. They should have better communicated to the Israelis [and said,] "This is not a threat to you. We're not moving this equipment in there because we're going to come across the border." You know, everybody should have talked to each other better.

JJ: But Israel wants that part of Syria, the south, entirely demilitarized. Do you think that's something that Syria would agree to?

MH: Yes, I do. You want Syria to have some security forces, you've got to have that, but they don't need a full-scale military with an air force and all the others. I think there are regional interests that would help provide a level of security for them that does not require the standing up of a navy and army ... The ideal is to help them to become stable economically.

JJ: There was reporting after the Israeli

strikes in Syria that some people in the Trump administration called Netanyahu a madman and asked, "What country are they going to bomb next?" Does that ring true to you?

MH: I think that people who know don't talk, and people who talk don't know ... I hate this kind of stuff where a person pretends that he knows something and blabs it out. The president has been very clear, again, without equivocation, that he and [Netanyahu] are very close friends. I saw with my own eyes and was in the room when there was an extraordinary level of camaraderie and cooperation ... For all this talk about how there's this terrible clash and all I would say, look at what is on the record, what is sourced with firsthand source, and dismiss the nonsense that people say ... I discount it as somebody who's trying to be important when they're not that important.

JJ: Still, it seems like there's a kernel of truth to there being some sort of push and pull within the Trump administration, and even more so within the broader Republican Party, about foreign policy and how to relate to Israel. Do you think this is going to be a problem for Israel?

MH: I really don't see that. I mean, are there moments where Israel and the U.S. will disagree? Of course, [it] happens in partnerships, whether you're in business or in marriage. I've been married 51 years. I guarantee you, my wife and I have had disagreements, sometimes, some pretty strong ones. She would tell you that she's right and I'm always wrong. That's part of the way we've stayed together 51 years. But it doesn't mean that you don't love each other and that you don't stay together.

It's part of the process of being adults that you hash out your differences. So I don't have any doubts that there are times they may have a conversation that they're not on the same page ... I haven't been privy to those, but that would be normal.

JJ: We're coming out of a complicated week for Israel and Christians. There was an issue with work visas for people working in Christian organizations. How is that going to work going forward?

MH: It really wasn't a big issue, except within that one area. And fortunately, we have it all resolved, and everybody's happy ... Really the new arrangement is the old arrangement, and that was that the process through which people would be granted visas coming to teach or to be a part of a Christian organization. It's been handled the same exact way for decades, and we were very clear. We didn't want anything new ... Just do what you've been doing. It's been working very well. There have been no problems with it. And then all of a sudden, in January, before I came, apparently there was a change in the way it was processed, and it was creating an enormous level of bureaucratic problems for the organizations, and they were frustrated, and it involved deep investigations and a lot of paperwork and cost...

So we had a meeting with a minister. Thought it went well and thought everything was resolved. The problem continued to happen. So if we would call with one specific case, it would get resolved, but then another one would come up, and then another ... So I sent a letter. It was terse, but I felt it was an honest assessment of, look, we thought this was fixed. It isn't. Here's the problems it's causing. We did not leak the letter, but it got leaked. I don't know who sent it out, but that's beyond the point. It resulted in immediate attention...

The point that I was making was that at a time when Israel needs all the friends it can get, and some of the best friends you have, the evangelical Christians in America, you really don't want to tell them they're not welcome, and that's the message that's being sent ... We have to get it fixed. So we did, so everybody's happy.

JJ: By unfortunate coincidence, this was the same week where an IDF shell hit the church in Gaza, and then there was a fire near a church in Taybeh that Palestinians blamed on Israel.

MH: I think that it was unfortunate they were all happening at the same time, but they're totally separate and not tied together in any way. The State of Israel didn't do anything in Taybeh. And you know, [the shelling of] the Church of the Holy Family was a horrible thing, but to their credit, [the IDF] admitted that it was a terrible mistake

and they apologized for it. It's not something you would ever want to see happen. But Israel doesn't get enough credit for owning up to a mistake when they make one and trying to make it right, and I appreciate that about them.

Jl: You hear these voices of people saying Israel is going to lose Christian support. And there are polls that show young evangelical support for Israel in decline. Do you think that Israel needs to be doing something differently or reaching out more?

MH: I think there is some lessening of the support ... There are several things at play. One is the advent of a lot of Middle Eastern studies on college and university campuses, highly funded by Gulf states that are pouring billions of dollars into these programs, and they're somewhat indoctrinating influences ... That's part of it, and a lot of it is that maybe there's just not a good historical context for some of the younger people that they don't know.

I'm convinced that one of the most important things people can do is to come to Israel and see for themselves. Don't even take my word for it. You just come. That's what I've been doing for 52 years. When I tell people my views of Israel, I tell them, look, it's not something I read in a book or watched on a documentary or listened to some people give lectures. I've been coming here for 52 consecutive years. I've watched this country develop and grow and change ... which I think had more credibility than just "I was at a march somewhere in Palo Alto [Calif.] and carried a sign for a few blocks. That's something I hope happens more and more. The Jewish community has Birthright that brings a lot of young Jewish people

here. There's now an organization called Passages, and it's bringing a lot of Christian kids here. I think that's the most wonderful thing that can happen.

Jl: Is the Trump administration still trying to negotiate with Iran? The Europeans said they will snap back sanctions if there isn't an agreement by the end of August, and an Israeli official recently said the U.S. was hoping they would do it sooner. Is that true?

MH: I don't know whether there's any U.S. policy on hoping it would come sooner. Frankly, I'm just glad to hear the Europeans stand up for something that is right for a change. You know, they've been beating up Israel instead of Hamas for a while, and it's kind of refreshing for them to realize that Iran's playing games, and they're still beating their chest and making threats that make no sense in light of what they've just been through.

In "Monty Python and the Holy Grail," King Arthur cuts off [the Black Knight's] arm, then his other arm, and then his legs. And the guy says, "'tis but a scratch." I mean, that's Iran. They got their arms and legs cut off, and they're hollering, "Just a scratch, you didn't get me" ... And you just want to say to them, "Did you not get the message? You just got your brains kicked out, and this would be a good time for you to experience a little humility and recognize you're never going to have a nuclear weapon. Everybody's telling you this, even Europe is telling you this. They're about to put sanctions on you because of it, and this might be a good time to reassess your aspirations to be a nuclear-weapon country." So I'm grateful that Europe is talking this way, and if they do it in August, wonderful. That's better than not

doing it at all. And maybe — probably not, but maybe — Iran comes to [its] senses.

Jl: You recently made an appearance in the courtroom for [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu's trial with a Bugs Bunny doll. Was that something that the president wanted you to do, or was that your idea? Some Israelis are concerned that the country or the judiciary could be penalized over Netanyahu's trial the way President Trump threatened to raise tariffs on Brazil over the corruption trials against former President Jair Bolsonaro. Is that a possibility?

MH: I have not heard anything like that ... [Trump] had two very significant, substantial statements about the trials here because he himself has been put through an extraordinary level of lawfare. It's just been shocking as an American citizen, to watch this, where they try to file charges, both civil and criminal, anywhere they can find a court that'll take him, New York, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Florida...

I think what he's trying to say is that if you're going to want to change the government, do it at the ballot box. You don't do it in the courtroom. What he saw happening to the prime minister here, he saw as a mirror reflection of what was going on there [in the U.S.]. And it's not so much that it's an accusation about the courts or their integrity here, but the act of prosecuting and the tenacity of prosecution while a prime minister is going through the middle of two wars and trying to get hostages released.

As far as my being there, I hadn't seen a circus in a long time, so I decided to go. ♦

Cracks in the coalition: Pro-Israel Arizonans wary of Sen. Mark Kelly's endorsements

The senator asked several pro-Israel organizations to refrain from involvement in races where he endorsed candidates without Jewish communal support

By Matthew Kassel

Sen. Mark Kelly (D-AZ) is facing new scrutiny from some Jewish community leaders in Arizona who are frustrated by his endorsements boosting the activist left in a series of recent House primaries in which he has withheld support for pro-Israel candidates and has even worked to actively oppose their campaigns behind the scenes, according to people familiar with the matter.

Kelly's engagement has strained what had been seen as a positive relationship with the pro-Israel community in Arizona, according to multiple local Jewish leaders who have voiced disappointment with his approach. Meanwhile, his recent interventions have raised questions about the political motivations of the Democratic senator in a key battleground state who has long been associated with his party's moderate, centrist wing.

The most recent source of tension with Jewish and pro-Israel leaders stems from Kelly's endorsement of Adelita Grijalva in a Tucson House primary this month to succeed her late father, former Rep. Raul Grijalva (D-AZ), a longtime critic of Israel who died in March.

While the younger Grijalva, a former Pima County supervisor, has a limited record of commentary on Israel and Middle East policy, her affiliation with a range of far-left leaders, including Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), has raised concerns among mainstream Jewish activists who favored one of her primary opponents, Daniel Hernandez, a former state lawmaker and pro-Israel progressive.

Grijalva, who struggled to articulate her positions on key issues such as conditioning aid to Israel — suggesting during the race, for instance, that U.S. involvement in the ongoing conflict “has not been helpful at all” — handily won the primary and is all

but assured a seat in the deeply Democratic district.

“Senator Kelly supports Adelita because she's ready to fight for his home district in Congress, and clearly the district agrees,” a spokesperson for Kelly said in a statement to *Jewish Insider* on Thursday. “He respects that some folks may have a difference of opinion, and values the strong relationships he has in the Arizona Jewish community.”

Still, the pro-Israel community in Arizona was troubled that Kelly had bolstered her campaign, owing in part to their differences in tone on Middle East policy. Among other issues, Grijalva called for a ceasefire just 10 days after Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, terror attacks, whereas Kelly expressed continued support for Israel in the aftermath of the incursion and faced protesters outside his Phoenix office who demanded he back an end to the war. While serving as a county supervisor, Grijalva had also reluctantly voted for a resolution condemning Hamas, voicing frustration that she “couldn't talk about peace and humanitarian aid” for Gaza.

One Jewish activist in Tucson, who like others spoke on condition of anonymity to avoid reprisals, called Kelly's endorsement “a slap in the face” to the pro-Israel community in Arizona. “He tries to make himself seem like a very moderate, pro-Israel guy — especially when he's fundraising,” the local activist claimed. “There's a lot of mistrust in the community right now.”

From an even more personal standpoint, the senator and his wife, former Rep. Gabby Giffords (D-AZ) — who also endorsed Grijalva — have long been close with Hernandez and his family. In 2011, Hernandez, who was then a 20-year-old intern for Giffords, had been credited with helping to save her life immediately after she was shot in the head by a gunman during a political event in the Tucson area.

Despite such history, Kelly privately urged a leading pro-Israel group, Democratic Majority for Israel, to stay out of the primary, according to people familiar with the matter who spoke with *JI* this week. The organization's political arm, DMFI PAC, ultimately endorsed Hernandez a month before the election, but it did not invest financial resources in the race, where polling indicated he was unlikely to prevail. He came in third place with just 14% of the vote.

“If you know the story, your mouth was wide open,” one Jewish community leader in Arizona remarked on Kelly's decision to oppose Hernandez. “It could easily have been ‘I can't help you but I'm not going to hurt you.’ But it wasn't — it was like a stab in the heart.”

In a statement to *JI* on Wednesday, a spokesperson for DMFI PAC — which has backed Kelly in both of his previous Senate races — said the group “makes its own decisions on endorsements and spending,” adding, “No one else does.”

Hernandez did not respond to a message seeking comment.

Thomas J. Volgy, a former mayor of Tucson and a professor of political science at the University of Arizona, pushed back against accusations that Kelly is now emboldening the party's far left. He said that Kelly is “not a single-issue politician” and had likely endorsed Grijalva based on “his understanding that she was the most qualified candidate in the field” — and “because she is consistent with his position on a range of issues, including on Israel but also across the spectrum.”

In a more closely contested Phoenix House race last cycle, Kelly had also engaged in private outreach to AIPAC, asking the pro-Israel lobbying group to keep away from the open-seat race in which he endorsed Raquel Terán, a left-leaning former state lawmaker

and party chair, according to people with knowledge of the situation.

Like Grijalva, Terán, a prominent progressive activist who drew support from Squad-aligned House members, refused to publicly clarify her views on key Middle East policy questions during the race, fueling concerns among Jewish leaders who had backed Yassamin Ansari, a former vice mayor of Phoenix endorsed by DMFI's political arm. Terán had also drawn criticism from Jewish community members over her decision to oppose an antisemitism reporting bill that had been widely approved by the Arizona state Legislature while she was in office.

In his outreach to AIPAC, whose super PAC has engaged in several recent primaries, Kelly sought to allay reservations with Terán's continued lack of clarity on Middle East policy issues, offering assurances that if she were elected, he would help to personally oversee her House votes related to Israel, according to people familiar with the situation.

A spokesperson for AIPAC, which chose not to get involved in the race last year, declined to comment.

Ansari, the first Iranian-American to hold public office in Arizona who had explicitly opposed placing conditions on aid to Israel, won the primary by just 39 votes after a closely watched recount, buoyed in part by nearly \$300,000 in outside spending from DMFI PAC.

Jason Morris, a pro-Israel activist and attorney in suburban Phoenix who supported Ansari and was informed of Kelly's conversation with AIPAC during

the race, said he found the senator's endorsement of Terán "baffling," and he voiced skepticism about the senator's apparent proposal to serve as a counsel on Middle East issues in Congress.

Morris acknowledged that he assesses candidates "from a much more narrow perspective than the senator," a former NASA astronaut and Navy pilot who is perhaps best known for his advocacy on gun control. But he said that Kelly's efforts have left an impression that the senator is largely unconcerned about rising hostility toward Israel within the party, arguing that his endorsements are, inadvertently or not, "fueling the left and the most progressive Israel haters in the Capitol."

Jewish and pro-Israel activists in Arizona have been puzzled over Kelly's moves, with some speculating that he is seeking to appease the left even as he continues to be identified as a moderate Democrat. "He's watched the party shift to the left in Arizona," one pro-Israel leader told JI, arguing that Kelly has helped "create a permission structure" in the state for establishment Democrats to support candidates who are not seen as dependable allies on Israel. "I think he thinks he can have his cake and eat it too."

"He wants to make sure that he's got cred with the lefties," another Jewish community leader said of Kelly, who saw his national profile rise last year as he was cited among a handful of candidates under consideration to be former Vice President Kamala Harris' running mate. "In the Jewish community in Arizona, there's a growing anxiety of, is this what's to come?"

Kelly, who has visited Israel at least twice since the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks, has maintained his support for Israel in the Senate, even as he has been a critic of Israel's military actions in Gaza and its handling of the unfolding humanitarian crisis in the enclave.

Last year, he raised the prospect of conditioning aid to Israel if the country did not "do better" to prevent civilian deaths in Gaza, though he later clarified that he was not yet ready to support such measures.

More recently, he has registered concerns with President Donald Trump's decision to strike Iran's nuclear facilities without congressional approval. In April, Kelly, who serves on the Senate Armed Services Committee, was among just three Democrats who broke with his party to confirm Elbridge Colby as under secretary of defense for policy — despite the nominee's public skepticism of support for Ukraine and comments on containing a nuclear Iran that had provoked anxiety in the pro-Israel community.

But while some pro-Israel leaders in Arizona have interpreted such activity as a sign that Kelly is now beginning to gradually move away from reflexively backing Israel, Morris, the Phoenix-based attorney, said he is more concerned about what he called the senator's "indifference" to the pro-Israel community as it raises objections to his recent endorsements in key House races.

"Ultimately," Morris told JI in a recent interview, "you have to conclude that this is about what's best for the senator — and not necessarily what's best for the pro-Israel community." ♦

Israeli Druze women working to aid victims of rape in Syria

Druze Israeli women attempted to smuggle emergency contraception to women who were allegedly sexually assaulted in the clashes

By Lahav Harkov

Amid clashes between Druze residents of Syria, Bedouins, militias supporting Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa and Syrian government forces in recent weeks, videos and eyewitness testimony has emerged of brutal executions, torture and rape in Sweida, a Druze town in southern Syria.

A group of Israelis has been working together to provide medical aid to Syrian Druze women who were allegedly sexually assaulted, an Israeli Druze source who is part of the initiative told *Jewish Insider* on Wednesday. There have been reports of rape of Druze girls and women, including the rape and murder of a five-year-old girl, though the number of victims is still unknown.

Israel began transferring NIS 2 million (over \$600,000) in humanitarian aid to the Sweida area in recent days, including food, first aid kits and other medical equipment. Hundreds of Israelis donated blood to be sent to Syria. On Sunday, four Israeli Air Force helicopters reportedly reached the hospital in Sweida, which was attacked in last week's clashes.

In addition to the official aid packages, Druze Israeli women attempted to smuggle emergency contraception delaying or preventing ovulation, to minimize the likelihood of pregnancy among women reportedly raped in the clashes. However, those packages were intercepted.

The Druze Israeli women are continuing their effort to send other kinds of medical aid to victims of rape in the attacks, the source said.

Laila Khalife, an Israeli Druze activist, said that pro-government militias and Bedouin in the area have "targeted aid for the Druze community, whether it's food or medicine, it's been stolen. Even medical crews were killed so they can't help."

The IDF declined to comment on the

matter.

One widely circulated video showed a reporter from the Qatar-backed Al-Araby channel interviewing a Bedouin man who claimed to have kidnapped the Druze women and children in his car. A woman in the car confirmed that she was Druze and that she and her family had hid in their home for a week before being taken captive. Reports indicated that 97 Druze women were missing on Tuesday, though Druze sources in Israel put the number as high as 1,000.

Khalife, a resident of Maghar in northern Israel, is part of a small group of Israelis — Druze and Jewish — who have been in constant contact with the Druze community in Syria and are working to provide them with aid.

She said that "almost 1,000 women were abducted and many more were murdered, some were raped before they were murdered and many were brutally violated. Their husbands and sons were murdered in front of them ... There is no one left to fight for [the abducted women]."

Khalife expressed concern that the missing women would be "forced to convert to Islam, violated and used for sex trafficking."

The women who remain in Sweida are "struggling with emotional and physical scars," Khalife said.

Attacking Druze women is particularly painful for the community, Khalife added, because "in the Druze religion, [women] are sacred and protected. They are symbols of honor, of dignity."

Khalife said that a fatwa, the Islamic religious ruling, calling to attack Sweida permitted the sexual violence: "It's a vile war tactic that existed hundreds and thousands of years ago. It has no place in today's world ... The human conscience cannot comprehend

it."

Khalife called on women worldwide "to raise protests in every street, every city and every country. Women should not remain silent."

"It's like Oct. 7," she added, referring to the 2023 Hamas attacks on southern Israel. "The world still doesn't believe and doesn't condemn all of the war crimes. The women's organizations did not condemn the rape and violation of women on Oct. 7. And that was only one day — this has been more than a week [in Sweida]."

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported earlier this week that 634 Druze were killed in the clashes in Sweida, about half of whom were combatants, and 194 of whom were executed, including a U.S. citizen, 35-year-old Hosam Saraya. In addition, 342 members of government-affiliated militias were killed, as well as 21 members of Bedouin tribes in the region.

Though U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Tom Barrack, who is also serving as the Trump administration's Syria envoy, claimed that "these atrocities that are happening ... are not by Syrian regime troops," the Syrian Observatory said it documented the massacre of 12 members of one family by Syrian Defense Ministry forces.

Over 150,000 Israelis are members of the Druze religious and ethnic minority. The population is deeply integrated in Israel — most of the men serve in the IDF, including at very high ranks. Israel has committed to protecting the Druze in Syria, and the IDF launched airstrikes in Syria last week, aiming to stop the attacks in Sweida, some 25 miles from the border. As many as 1,000 Israeli Druze illegally crossed into Syria to try to defend their brethren.

Khalife said that the attacks are "a horrifying act of ethnic cleansing, not just fighting in a war zone. We are witnessing

hell on earth in real time, entire villages being invaded and crushed.”

She said that the names and photos of some Druze university students in Damascus have been published on social

media with calls to rape, abduct and kill them.

Druze in Israel continue to be in contact with their Syrian counterparts to try to help.

“For the Druze community, it doesn’t

matter where you are in the world, we are very connected,” Khalife said. “People don’t understand the bond we share. It’s like having a twin, and you can feel their pain.” ♦

JULY 23, 2025

Experts champion Jewish education as the key to thriving Jewish communities

Doyen of American Jewish history Jonathan Sarna says current moment of struggle is producing the next generation of leaders

By Haley Cohen

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Making Jewish education more accessible is the key to many of the challenges facing American Jews today, several Jewish leaders said on Monday at a conference on the future of American Jewry, held at the UJA-Federation headquarters in New York City.

Drawing inspiration from the teachings of the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, some 100 rabbis, lay leaders, entrepreneurs and CEOs of Jewish organizations debated how to expand Jewish education — as well as a number of other issues facing American Jewry — at the daylong conference organized by Reut USA and The Rabbi Sacks Legacy.

“A greater threat even than the antisemites is our own well-being internally, our own loss of identity, our own distance from our history, values and knowledge from our texts,” Elan Carr, CEO of the Israeli-American Council and former U.S. special envoy for monitoring and combating antisemitism in the first Trump administration, told attendees.

Carr cited a Rabbi Sacks framework to address this: “To defend a country, you need an army. But to defend an identity, you need a school. Judaism is the religion of the book, not the sword,” the former British chief rabbi famously said.

The conference, titled “The Great Diaspora: Visioning American Jewry at America’s 250th,” was held as preparations are underway for the country’s 250th anniversary celebration next summer

and American Jews are reflecting on the condition and direction of Jewish life in America for the coming generations.

The anniversary comes as American Jewry faces antisemitism at levels not seen in decades, record-high intermarriage and a volatile relationship with the State of Israel. While Jewish leaders largely agree that the solution is more Jewish education, some at the conference were divided over best approaches to make education accessible — ranging from tuition-free day schools to establishing more inclusive communities.

“We need to give our kids a Jewish education,” Carr said. “And we are pricing ourselves out of existence. This has to be fixed.” The average cost of Jewish day school tuition in New York falls between \$20,000 to \$35,000 per year.

Rabbi Marc Schneier, founder of the Hampton Synagogue in Westhampton Beach, N.Y., offered a solution to the high cost of Jewish day schools. Schneier announced that he is working on an initiative for tuition-free Jewish day schools, in what would be a network across the country of free Jewish schools in 25 communities, including Suffolk County, N.Y., where his congregation is based and where about 85,000 Jews live. Schneier did not provide details on which philanthropists would back the initiative.

But Ellen Finkelstein, CEO of Hadassah Women’s Zionist Organization of America, argued that finances are not “at the root of why every Jewish student in America does not have a Jewish education.”

“The reason that Jews in America don’t all put their children in Jewish day schools

is because they don’t feel welcomed. I think for many Jews, it’s frightening to put their child in a day school where they may be judged based on their own level of religiosity or engagement. It’s a problem that we as a society need to address,” Finkelstein said.

In another panel, Jewish leaders, including former U.S. Ambassador to Israel Jack Lew, debated how to address major threats to the physical security of American Jewry, just months after the fatal shooting of two Israeli Embassy staffers in Washington and the firebombing of advocates at a march for Israeli hostages in Boulder, Colo.

The primary threats to American Jewish security, said Sapir Institute Director Chanan Weissman, are a wide gap on shared priorities, prevalence of conspiracy theories, distrust in institutions and success of the community misinterpreted as a privilege.

“The danger we face when thinking about national security is not per se a danger to Jews but a danger to America,” which stems from both the far left and the far right, said Mijal Bitton, community leader of Downtown Minyan, a congregation in Manhattan. “We as Jews are feeling our safety threatened, because America is being threatened.”

Bitton said it’s not appropriate for American Jews to “be only loyal to one [political] party. Instead, we have to call out extremes on the right and on the left.”

Dana Gibber, CEO of Flowcarbon, who helps run the pro-Israel political action committee NORPAC, offered a solution. It is “well past time that we have a Jewish political machine,” she said.”

The call comes against the backdrop of Zohran Mamdani's victory in the New York City Democratic mayoral primary last month — a democratic socialist who has repeatedly declined to condemn the term “globalize the intifada,” defending it as an expression of Palestinian rights.

“Beyond fundraising, [it would mean] having a well-organized, well-orchestrated group of Jewish electorate leaders that is broken down by synagogues and community centers that has precincts and captains and organizes us as an electorate so we go out and vote when anything that is on the ballot is relevant to us, but in particular antisemitism,” said Gibber, who called the idea a “national security priority.”

Several of the conference's panels referred to “Oct. 8 Jews,” a term used to describe Jews who reconnected with their Jewish roots in the aftermath of the Oct. 7 terrorist attacks in Israel. Studies commissioned by Jewish Federations of North America have documented “the Surge,” an uptick in engagement among previously unaffiliated Jews who are increasingly donating to Israeli and Jewish causes, joining synagogues, attending rallies and gathering regularly for Shabbat. In April, the uptick in Jewish engagement appeared to plateau — with a follow-up study finding that about a third of the respondents (31%) saying that they are engaging more with the Jewish community than they did in the past, compared to 42% who said so the year prior.

But speakers debated whether this trend

will endure, as well as the unique challenges it poses to philanthropy and whether money is being spent in the right places.

“American Jewish philanthropy isn't just larger in scale than previous diasporas. It's different in kind. We don't just support institutions, we create movements,” said Maimonides Fund President Mark Charendoff. “We don't just respond to crises, we shape the future... acting as full partners in American society.”

“This unique position brings us unique responsibilities,” he said, referring to a question once posed by Rabbi Sacks: “Can a distinctive Jewish population survive in an open society?”

“The answer depends on whether we can understand that America doesn't just offer us freedom, it offers us the opportunity to help define what freedom means for everyone,” Charendoff answered.

But such large-scale philanthropy is sometimes “taken way too far,” argued Zoya Raynes, chair of the Jewish Funders Network, which has mapped out the ecosystem of organizations focused on antisemitism in the U.S.

According to Raynes, there are over 160 nonprofits in the U.S. that are solely focused on combating antisemitism, which she argued is an indication of disorganization. “No one can look at the result and say we are doing a good job, nor can anyone look at this model and say it's okay,” said Raynes, who is also a managing director at Bank of America. “If this is the moment of ‘what did

you do when,’ someone will look back at this model and ask how we allowed it to exist.”

Jonathan Sarna, a prominent historian and retiring professor of American Jewry at Brandeis University, said “Oct. 8 Jews” are both unique to today and have also existed in every generation of American Jewry.

The future of American Jewry, Sarna said, largely depends on the group of influential young Jewish leaders on college campuses, many of whom did not expect to hold Jewish leadership roles but were thrust into them by the increase of antisemitism on campuses in the aftermath of Oct. 7. “When we look at those young Jews in the late 19th century who wanted to build up the American Jewish community, there's much we can learn from them,” said Sarna. “They too were astonished at the development of antisemitism in the 1870s. Jews were expelled from clubs and institutions. The response of some Jews was not to run away but to create organizations.. The young people who were transformed by antisemitism, they continued to be Jewish leaders and transform American Jewish life.”

“We need to look at them as our Henrietta Szolds and Cyrus Adlers,” continued Sarna, referring to the founder of Hadassah and leader of Conservative Judaism, respectively. “We have a great opportunity in many ways. Our job is to empower those young Jewish leaders on campuses. They're the future leadership. They're the hope of the future of American Jewish unity.” ♦

JULY 23, 2025

Shapiro rebukes Mamdani for failing to condemn ‘blatantly antisemitic’ extremists

The Pennsylvania governor told JI: ‘When supporters of yours say things that are blatantly antisemitic, you can't leave room for that to just sit there’

By Gabby Deutch

LEWISTOWN, Pa. — Inside a coffee shop in this small town of 8,500 people, hundreds of miles from the bustle of Manhattan, Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro made his first public comments about Zohran Mamdani, criticizing the New York City Democratic

mayoral candidate for not taking a stronger stand against “extremists” who have made “blatantly antisemitic” comments.

“He seemed to run a campaign that excited New Yorkers. He also seemed to run a campaign where he left open far too much space for extremists to either use

his words or for him to not condemn the words of extremists that said some blatantly antisemitic things,” Shapiro told *Jewish Insider* in an interview on Wednesday.

Shapiro's comments come as Mamdani, who defeated former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo in the Democratic primary

last month, continues to face backlash for declining to condemn the phrase “globalize the intifada.” (Mamdani told business leaders last week that he would “discourage” use of the slogan.)

National Democratic figures have struggled to figure out how to respond to Mamdani’s come-from-behind victory and to assess what the election of a self-proclaimed democratic socialist as the Democratic nominee for mayor of the largest city in the country means for the future of the party.

Neither Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) nor House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) have endorsed Mamdani, while some progressive leaders — such as Sens. Chris Murphy (D-CT) and Bernie Sanders (I-VT) — have embraced him. Sen. Elissa Slotkin (D-MI), another swing-state Democrat, said on Wednesday that Mamdani’s victory is a “message” that “cost of living and the economy is the driving issue for the average person.”

Democratic National Committee Chair Ken Martin, when asked about Mamdani’s handling of the “globalize the intifada” slogan, said earlier this month that he did not agree with everything Mamdani has said, but that the Democrats are a “big tent” party. Martin later clarified that he found the “intifada” phrase “reckless and dangerous.”

Widely viewed as a possible 2028 presidential candidate, Shapiro has steered clear of weighing in on a number of divisive national issues, preferring instead to focus on Pennsylvania, where he maintains a 61% approval rating. But on Wednesday, he offered a sharp message to Mamdani.

“I’ll say this about Mamdani or any other leader,” Shapiro said. “If you want to lead New York, you want to lead Pennsylvania, you want to lead the United States of America, you’re a leader. I don’t care if you’re a Republican or Democratic leader

or a democratic socialist leader. You have to speak and act with moral clarity, and when supporters of yours say things that are blatantly antisemitic, you can’t leave room for that to just sit there. You’ve got to condemn that.”

At a moment of declining support for Israel within the Democratic Party, the Jewish governor told JI that he stands by his pro-Israel bona fides.

“I think one of the things that always strengthened Israel was the fact that the relationship America had with Israel was not even bipartisan, but somewhat nonpartisan. Figuring out ways to build bridges between the parties, between people of different walks of life, to support Israel, I think is important,” he noted. “I think just in general, across the board, I want to see more support for Israel, for a Jewish state. That doesn’t mean that one can’t be critical of Israeli policy.”

There is more that politicians on both sides of the aisle need to do to maintain support for Israel and the U.S.-Israel relationship, Shapiro said, though he added that “the majority of that work is going to happen in Washington.” He declined to specifically address Democrats’ views on Israel or polling that showed a massive drop in Democratic support for Israel since 2023.

“I don’t do foreign policy in Pennsylvania in my role as governor, but I do think it is important to repair that relationship,” Shapiro said. “I am concerned that support for Israel in the United States broadly is down compared to what it was a decade ago.”

It isn’t only American leaders who need to work to strengthen ties between Israel and the U.S., Shapiro said. He placed some of the blame on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

“I think if you care about the future safety and security of Israel, and you’re the

leader of Israel as Netanyahu is at present time, you’ve got to find ways to build bridges to people in both parties, to leaders in both parties,” said Shapiro, who has long been a critic of Netanyahu’s leadership. But he asserted that opposition to Netanyahu as prime minister should not be equated with opposition to the existence of a Jewish state.

“There are policies of the Netanyahu government that I don’t support. I’ve been very vocal about that. But there’s a difference between not supporting the policies of whoever’s in charge at a particular time, and the underlying notion of a Jewish state of Israel,” said Shapiro. “I do think it is important to strengthen people’s understanding of Israel and the relationship America should have with Israel and to strengthen that bond.”

Shapiro, one of the most prominent Jewish politicians in the country, has been on the receiving end of antisemitic smears over his support for Israel. In April, the governor’s mansion in Harrisburg was set ablaze in an arson attack just hours after Shapiro and his family had hosted a Passover Seder.

Police said the alleged perpetrator was motivated by anti-Israel animus, but Shapiro has repeatedly declined to characterize the incident as antisemitic in nature, saying that doing so would be “unhelpful” to prosecutors who have not brought hate crime charges.

Shapiro told JI the arson attack left a profound impact on him, both personally and religiously. It brought him closer, he said, to “my faith and my spirituality.”

“It made me believe even more, not just in my God, but in the power of prayer,” said Shapiro. “It’s given me a deeper, spiritual connection of my faith and a deeper connection to people of other faiths.” ♦

The new normal for Jewish Democratic staffers on Capitol Hill: isolated, fearful, united

Facing antisemitism in the workplace, these staffers have turned to each other in group chats and at the Shabbat dinner table for comfort

By Gabby Deutch, Danielle Cohen-Kanik

On the night of May 21, several dozen young diplomats and political aides gathered at the Capital Jewish Museum in Washington for a reception focused on humanitarian aid efforts in Gaza.

The event was one of dozens of similar programs that happen around Washington, offering networking opportunities and social connection (alongside tasty hors d'oeuvres) to the overworked, largely underpaid employees that power Congress and the federal bureaucracy. But this event imprinted on the minds of young Jewish politicians because of what happened as it was ending, when Sarah Lynn Milgrim and Yaron Lischinsky, two Israeli Embassy staffers, were shot and killed just after leaving the American Jewish Committee event by an assailant who said that he carried out the attack “for Gaza.”

“I saw the news and I said, ‘Could’ve been any of us,’” a legislative aide for a Democratic member of Congress, who had a ticket to that night’s event, told *Jewish Insider* last week.

For that staffer, the event brought back to the fore the kind of visceral pain and discomfort that Jewish congressional aides — especially those in Democratic offices and social circles — have gotten used to dealing with since the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas terror attacks in Israel.

Confronting the aftermath of that day and the ongoing war in Gaza has been a challenge for American Jews in all fields, many of whom have had to face growing antisemitism and antipathy to Israel in their professional lives. But in the Democratic spaces of Capitol Hill — one of the most consequential and most scrutinized workplaces in the country, which is in large part managed by young staffers in their 20s and 30s — the issue is inescapable.

Many of the liberal-minded Jewish

staffers on the Hill came to Washington to work on issues such as reproductive rights, access to health care and environmental policy. Now, for nearly two years, they have had to navigate a professional environment that demands an air of detached professionalism while their fellow staffers and Democrats writ large adopt a more critical approach to Israel and antisemitism.

A June poll showed Democratic sympathy toward Israel at an all-time low, with 12% saying they sympathize more with Israelis, and 60% saying they sympathize more with Palestinians. That was a major drop from November 2023, when 34% of Democrats said they were more sympathetic to Israelis and 41% said they were more sympathetic to Palestinians.

Several Democratic Jewish staffers, ranging from junior aides to chiefs of staff — most of whom requested anonymity, wary of being made a target of antisemitism and concerned about putting themselves at risk professionally at a time when Democratic jobs are hard to come by — told JI that, in the face of growing antipathy to Israel and continued antisemitic terror and threats, they have turned to each other to build a tight-knit community among Jews working on Capitol Hill.

“It has led to increased camaraderie and dialogue and kind of just a common understanding and bond ... We work for a lot of different members: members who are Jewish, members who are not Jewish, members who one of their main issues is the U.S.-Israel relationship, members who are not mainly concerned with it,” said the legislative staffer. “But nonetheless, I think a lot of us are united and brought together by the aftermath of Oct. 7.”

“If you’re just going to pick up lunch, and you just hear something about

‘apartheid Israel’ in the cafeteria, that hurts. You feel something on that,” said one former senior Jewish staffer who no longer works on Capitol Hill.

Laurie Saroff spent more than 20 years on Capitol Hill, most recently as chief of staff to Rep. Lou Correa (D-CA). When she left Congress in 2022, she started a bipartisan networking organization called the Capitol Jewish Women’s Network.

“So many of us, which is something people don’t understand, are grieving. We’ve been grieving for 650-plus days. Everyone is touched at a different level, but it’s very personal, and sometimes I’m with people who are not Jewish and don’t understand how this impacts us so much,” Saroff told JI. “I think there’s a need for people to come together that I hadn’t seen in the past.”

Part of that desire to connect came from a feeling of alienation from other colleagues on Capitol Hill. Encountering charged anti-Israel rhetoric in the hallways of the Capitol and its fortress of office buildings has become commonplace.

“If you’re just going to pick up lunch, and you just hear something about ‘apartheid Israel’ in the cafeteria, that hurts. You feel something on that,” said one former senior Jewish staffer who no longer works on Capitol Hill. Whenever the war in Gaza intensifies, congressional offices face a barrage of angry, often confrontational phone calls seeking to pressure the members not to support Israel, which the Jewish staffer called “absolutely brutal” for the interns tasked with picking up the phone.

“The things that we hear in our day-to-day about the way that people talk about Jewish communities or Israel groups is so outside the boundaries of what could be considered polite or not antisemitic statements — ‘AIPAC controlling the

government,' AIPAC's money in races where they don't even spend it, and yet it's blamed on AIPAC," a Jewish foreign policy staffer told JI. "We hear from callers all day long about AIPAC money. Clearly at this point, it's just a stand-in for saying Jewish money. That's how I hear it."

Soon after the Oct. 7 attacks, some Democratic congressional staffers began to pressure their bosses to call for a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. "Dear White Staffers," an Instagram account that first went viral several years ago for revealing allegations of lawmaker misconduct, has taken a sharply anti-Israel turn, frustrating many Jewish aides who see their colleagues continuing to follow and engage with the account.

In 2024, some staffers who wanted the U.S. to take a tougher line against Israel created a website that they dubbed the Congressional Dissent Channel. "We are congressional aides dedicated to changing the paradigm of U.S. support for the genocide against Palestinians in Gaza being carried out by the state of Israel," the organizers wrote on the website, which has since been taken offline.

"I also have had a lot of Dem staff who are not Jewish — who kind of privately don't agree with this sort of orthodoxy on the topic that is emerging — reach out to me and be like, 'This is kind of crazy,'" a Jewish Democratic staffer said. "And it's really nice to hear that. And I've definitely gotten closer to some people for that reason," she told JI, though she added that the anti-Israel contingent in the Democratic Party and on the Hill "feel like there's a lot of permissiveness for them to say things that are really not acceptable."

"It's the small things, like Dear White Staffers. You can't even explain to your colleagues how repugnant some of these posts are. For any other group, it feels like they would be disciplined. The post would be removed. There would have to be apologies," the foreign policy staffer told JI. "It's no secret that — how do I say this? — that diversity is something that seems to be really valued, except for when it comes to Jewish voices."

Another Jewish Democratic staffer wanted to make clear that many of her non-Jewish colleagues were similarly alarmed by the language that other Hill staffers had adopted after Oct. 7.

"I also have had a lot of Dem staff who are not Jewish — who kind of privately don't agree with this sort of orthodoxy on the topic that is emerging — reach out to me and be like, 'This is kind of crazy.' And it's really nice to hear that. And I've definitely gotten closer to some people for that reason," she told JI, though she added that the anti-Israel contingent in the Democratic Party and on the Hill "feel like there's a lot of permissiveness for them to say things that are really not acceptable."

A senior staffer for a pro-Israel member of Congress said that when their office interviewed potential new hires after Oct. 7, the interviewers began asking job candidates — mostly younger people seeking early career roles — if they were comfortable with the member's views on Israel and other topics, and what they would do if they disagreed.

"You had to walk on eggshells with your staff, because staff are way more progressive than the offices we were representing. It was a very, very challenging thing, while you're also dealing with the personal ramifications and trauma of the actual events that happened," said the former senior staffer who no longer works on the Hill. "I remember there was this one junior staff walkout, and it was the craziest thing to me, because if you're not from the community, if you're not a constituent, what are you trying to do? Members are trying to represent the interests of their district, not what their staff or interns want them to do."

With these experiences casting a shadow over Jewish staffers' time on the Hill and their understanding of politics and identity, they've found comfort in each other and in Jewish tradition.

"There's a deep desire amongst people to lean on the most beautiful parts of the [Jewish] identity," a Jewish policy staffer told JI. "I think that gives people a lot of strength because it's really hard to hear all these things about your community all the time, and then you go to something like a

Shabbat dinner ... and you're really reminded that this negative barrage is something that you have to endure for the sake of something that is really meaningful and powerful."

The legislative aide who had purchased a ticket to the Capital Jewish Museum event said that the aftermath of Oct. 7 and rising antisemitism are "not theoretical and are extraordinarily personal," which "is a theme that I have found has united and brought together a lot of Jewish staffers on the Hill." The past two years have also led to "increased camaraderie and dialogue and a common understanding and bond," bringing these staffers together both inside and outside the workplace.

The staffer who found solidarity with some non-Jewish colleagues said Jewish staff "have formed group chats to support each other and check in and ... vent about frustrating experiences that they're having, stuff like that. So I definitely think professionally and personally the community has deepened a lot and people are really leaning on each other."

"Shabbat has really been an anchor, I think," the aide told JI. Congressional staffers endure "lots of busy weeks, lots of long weeknights." Joining together for a Shabbat meal, as groups of staffers do frequently, becomes "an intentional place to kind of withdraw from that and exist in our Jewish selves."

The staffer said that, in attending Shabbat dinners, "there's a deep desire amongst people to lean on the most beautiful parts of the [Jewish] identity. I think that gives people a lot of strength because it's really hard to hear all these things about your community all the time, and then you go to something like a Shabbat dinner ... and you're really reminded that this negative barrage is something that you have to endure for the sake of something that is really meaningful and powerful."

Shabbat, she added, is "a good antidote for the constant gaslighting." ♦

New Brandeis study finds university faculty more heterodox, less anti-Israel than generally presumed

They're not very political... and most of them are not responsible for the failure of universities to deal with the antisemitism problem on campus,' a lead author says

By Nira Dayanim

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Puncturing commonly held perceptions of academics as uniformly liberal-minded, a new study from Brandeis University reveals that most faculty members at American research universities are not politically active, including on issues related to Israel, do not endorse antisemitic statements and hold a wide array of viewpoints on controversial issues.

"The one-dimensional portrayal of U.S. universities as bastions of the political left filled with 'woke' faculty who impose their views on students is at odds with the findings of this study," wrote the authors of the study, "Ideology in the Classroom: How Faculty at U.S. Universities Navigate Politics and Pedagogy Amid Federal Pressure Over Viewpoint Diversity and Antisemitism," which was published on Tuesday.

The study was conducted by researchers Graham Wright, Shahar Hecht and Leonard Saxe from Brandeis' Steinhardt Social Research Institute and Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies. It is the third study conducted by the center analyzing the college campus environment following Hamas' Oct. 7 terror attacks in Israel. It surveyed over 2,200 faculty from nearly 150 R1 research universities across the country on their perspectives on several issues, including racism, climate change, American democracy and the Russian-Ukrainian and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts.

"They're people who are dedicated to whatever their field is. They're not very

political. They're not political activists most of the time, and most of them are not responsible for the failure of universities to deal with the antisemitism problem on campus," Saxe told eJewishPhilanthropy ahead of the publication.

The study analyzed what role faculty play in campus antisemitism, as well as broader political and educational opinions among faculty — in light of the Trump administration's battle with numerous higher education institutions, Saxe said.

"The goal of it is to help develop better ways for universities and university faculty to deal with the current situation, the pressures from the government, as well as the need to teach better and to avoid promoting antisemitism and discrimination," he said.

Certain findings — that faculty in the humanities are likely to hold more liberal attitudes than those in the sciences — were in line with commonly held conceptions. However, other facets, such as the fact that a majority of faculty reported being interested in teaching a variety of perspectives on controversial topics, challenge common perceptions of academic ideologues, according to Saxe.

The expertise of faculty should be leveraged to combat antisemitism and other forms of hatred. "Faculty are allies, they're not enemies," he told eJP.

According to the study, a climate of antisemitism on campus is "more likely to be driven by the actions of a very small number of faculty members with extreme views, as opposed to the actions of whole fields or disciplines."

The study found that the vast majority of faculty (90%) were not hostile to either Jews or Israel. Asked whether they agree with six questions aimed at assessing hostility towards Jews and Israel, 3% of non-Jewish faculty were found to be hostile to Israel, while 7% were hostile towards Jews.

Of the 3% who were deemed "hostile to Israel," most respondents (97%) responded that they would not "want to collaborate with any scholars that support the existence of Israel as a Jewish state." Of those in the "hostile to Jews" category, 93% agreed with the claim that "Jews have too much power." Extremely liberal faculty were more likely to be hostile to Israel, while those with conservative political views were more likely to be hostile to Jews.

Recent polling highlights a significant generational gap in perspectives on Israel, with younger generations holding more negative views. In this study, 90% of faculty surveyed were older than 35. According to Saxe, findings from the last study indicate that for a majority of Jewish students, antisemitism can be most closely tied to their peers, not faculty members.

"[Faculty is] not responsible in the sense that they're teaching an ideology which students are taking and running to the streets with," said Saxe. "When we ask students what the antisemitism is that they feel, it's from other students who cut off social relations, other students who don't let them into the cafeteria, who make the murder, the kidnapping of Israelis out to be some great humanitarian, justice-seeking act." ♦

Sen. Mark Warner: U.S. strikes on Iran were a ‘success,’ but what happens next is critical

‘If the current status quo is the same a year from now and it actually leads towards further negotiation — success,’ Warner told JI

By Marc Rod

Sen. Mark Warner (D-VA) told *Jewish Insider* on Friday that he’s inclined to view the Trump administration’s strikes last month on Iran’s nuclear facilities as a “success,” if negotiations with Tehran resume and barring substantial future retaliation from Iran.

His comments largely echo sentiments shared earlier in the day by Sen. Chris Coons (D-DE) at the Aspen Security Forum, suggesting an increasing willingness by moderate, national security-minded Democrats to publicly acknowledge positive outcomes of the strikes, even if they maintain other concerns about the process that produced them.

“I will acknowledge the successfulness of the Israeli attacks and how back-foot the regime was. The fact that they didn’t launch the thousands of missiles,” Warner told JI on the sidelines of the forum. “I was concerned about an attack that didn’t bring Congress along. And I do think there was a huge process foul when the Gang of Eight wasn’t notified and the Republicans [were]. Trump’s first administration never did that — but I have never contested the success.”

Warner, the vice chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said he’s been pleased that there has not been ongoing asymmetric retaliation against the U.S. by Iran, such as cyber, sleeper cell or Iraqi militia attacks.

“If the current status quo is the same a year from now and it actually leads towards further negotiation — success.”

Warner, Coons and other top Democrats had cautioned the administration against unilateral action against Iran without congressional approval just days before the attack.

“Let’s make no doubt that the Iranian regime [are] bad guys, and that is why I’ve been such a consistent supporter of Israel,”

Warner told JI.

“Iran’s, at least so far, been shown to be more of a paper tiger,” Warner said. “If we could just get to the resolution in Gaza, there really could be a fresh start.”

The senator said that his ongoing concern is how President Donald Trump has responded to the attacks, declaring that Iran’s nuclear program had been completely obliterated.

“The president, within two hours of the strike, set an arbitrary, almost impossible standard to meet, in terms of ‘total obliteration,’” Warner said. “To get the enriched uranium you’re going to need troops on the ground. And there are more than three sites — the vast majority [of the activity] was [at] those three, but there was some bad stuff happening elsewhere.”

He said the intelligence community had also been pressured to “contort itself to meet” the assessment Trump put forward.

In the immediate aftermath of the strikes, Warner and other Democrats expressed frustration that the Trump administration took days to brief Congress about them. Warner said he’s received “some additional clarity” in the weeks since the strikes about their effects. But he said that without physically sending operatives into the facilities, it’s difficult to know for sure the impacts of the strikes.

“Other nations have made assessments that were more in the multiple months” of delay to Iran’s nuclear program, “but I’m not even sure that’s the right metric,” Warner said. “It was a success. So the question is, what’s next? That, I don’t have visibility on.”

Going forward, Warner emphasized the need for negotiations to bring International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors back into

Iran, adding that he wants to look further into the source of the delays in resuming talks.

Warner said he’s also seeking information on the timeline on which Iran would be able to build a less sophisticated nuclear device that could be delivered in a truck, rather than via a ballistic missile.

Though he noted that U.S. intelligence had not assessed that Iran was actively constructing a nuclear weapon, he said he had heard reports about an Israeli assessment that offered a different view and that he is looking further into it.

Asked about the fluid situation in Syria, in which Israel went, in the span of just a week, from floating normalization with the new Syrian government to bombing key government facilities in response to attacks on the Druze population, Warner indicated he’s still gathering information.

He said that Israel is “appropriately ... very protective of its Druze population,” adding that he does not know at this point whether the Syrian government forces attacking the Druze population are doing so at the orders of that government.

He said he’s hopeful that Israel and other parties involved will not miss an opportunity to find a peaceful resolution that could defuse a major longtime threat to Israel’s north.

Warner said he also wants to see Trump use his “enormous influence in Israel” to “[force] Bibi’s government into a return of the hostages, a ceasefire,” saying that would open up opportunities for transformational change in the region, including Saudi-Israeli normalization.

Warner said that while he’s been critical of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel and the IDF deserve credit for their surprise accomplishments in taking down Iran’s proxy network and in

their strikes against Iran itself.

“The [Jewish community’s] concern is real and understandable,” Warner said. He said that he has been struck by the “level of anger, animosity, vile things said” in anti-Israel protests that have targeted him — “and I’m not Jewish. And I can only imagine.”

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Asked how concerned he is about the possibility of homeland attacks against the Jewish community carried out by or in the name of Iran, Warner said that U.S. intelligence monitors potential threats fairly comprehensively, but indicated that he’s most worried about radicalized lone-wolf attacks, like those in Washington and Boulder, Colo.

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Warner expressed frustration at the way that the Palestinian cause has crowded out other global issues on college campuses. He said that it “would be healthy” if young people “have the chance to get exposed to other things in the world,” offering as examples the conflict in Sudan — which he said has been more deadly than Gaza and Ukraine combined — and the military junta in Myanmar.

On the subject of the Houthis, who have ramped up attacks against commercial shipping and Israel in recent weeks, Warner called the group a “tough nut to crack,” noting that a protracted Saudi and Emirati

campaign against the Iran-backed terrorist group in Yemen had failed to put the issue to bed. But he said that the U.S. can’t rule out further military action against the group.

“I hope that those plans would be kept classified and not shared ... on a device that’s not secure,” he quipped, referencing the Signalgate scandal, which he said had prompted concern from the Israeli government.

Last week’s Aspen summit, which typically prioritizes bipartisan and nonpartisan discussion and solution-making, became particularly politicized after nearly all Trump administration speakers canceled their participation, followed by a handful of foreign and private sector leaders and former government officials disappearing from the week’s agenda.

The issue was a frequent topic of discussion both on the main stage and across the Aspen Meadows campus last week, seen by many as a sign of the ways that intense partisanship has infiltrated U.S. foreign policy, once seen as a less antagonistic space.

Warner’s own panel featured himself and Coons, but not a Republican senator, as has been tradition.

Nevertheless, Warner said that bipartisanship on foreign policy issues still lives in the Senate, noting that the Intelligence Committee had passed an Intelligence Authorization Act recently in a nearly unanimous vote.

Looking ahead, he said the “easiest place to rebuild that consensus is around China,” which he described as an unprecedented competitor. He said there has been a long and difficult journey across multiple

administrations to refocus on China, but he said there has been bipartisan success in pushing back against China.

He also argued that the Trump administration’s transactional and short-sighted approach to foreign policy goes against a longtime bipartisan tradition of viewing U.S. international relationships as an effort in “mutual trust-building.”

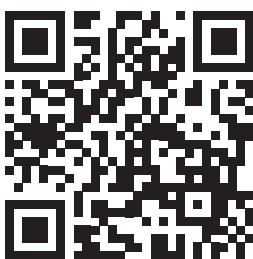
He said that his Republican colleagues privately disagree with many of Trump’s more outlandish foreign policy efforts — like annexing Canada. “At some point, there’s got to be a break,” he responded, when pressed on the fact that some Republicans defend Trump’s policies publicly despite those private disagreements.

Warner told JI that the bill the Intelligence Committee recently passed would cut the size of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. But, despite offering biting criticisms of DNI Tulsi Gabbard, Warner said that the reform efforts are not a reflection of or specifically prompted by concerns about her conduct in the role.

“I’m very comfortable with the idea of bringing the mission closer to what it was originally, but also making sure that people who are at the ODNI get returned to their original home agency and don’t get [fired],” Warner said.

Clarifying comments that he made on the panel about close U.S. intelligence partners in the Five Eyes group curtailing their intelligence sharing with the United States, Warner said he was not aware of specific instances in which that had happened, but said that U.S. partners are concerned about the state of the U.S. intelligence community.

“The challenge about intelligence sharing is [that] this is all based on trust,” Warner said. ♦



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