

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

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NOVEMBER 13, 2025

## Israel's neighbors have banned the Muslim Brotherhood, but Israel hasn't. Why not?

*One of its branches is banned for Hamas ties. The other sits in the Knesset*

By Lahav Harkov

While Congress is working on a bill to designate the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization in the U.S., and the Islamist group is banned from Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and beyond, the group's status in Israel is much more complicated.

The matter drew renewed attention this week after Mansour Abbas, the leader of the Ra'am party in the Knesset, an ideological offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, declined to call for the eradication of Hamas on Israeli radio.

In an interview with Israeli public broadcaster KAN, Abbas mostly lamented the high rate of crime and gun violence in Israeli-Arab society, but when he mentioned Gaza, the interviewer, Asaf Liberman, asked whether he sees Hamas as part of the enclave's future.

"Palestinian society needs to pick its leadership and go on a new path towards peace and reconciliation," Abbas responded.

Liberman twice repeated his question and sharpened it: "Does Hamas need to be destroyed?"

Abbas added that an international force must enter Gaza and after an interim period a security force of the Palestinian Authority would be trained, but after being pressed to make his position on Hamas clear, he said the interview was beginning to feel like an "interrogation," and pointed out that he had gone on air to talk about domestic issues facing Arab Israelis. "If you want to talk about crime, fine, if not, bye," he said, before hanging up.

Abbas has previously condemned Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks, calling them unjustifiable and inhumane, and called for the release of the hostages. The other

reporter who conducted the interview, Suleiman Maswadeh, later noted that Abbas and his family had recently received death threats, and hinted that was the reason the Knesset member avoided repeating his previously articulated position — which Maswadeh said does not include a future for Hamas in the governance of Gaza.

In 2021, the Ra'am party became the first Arab party in 50 years to join an Israeli governing coalition, which was celebrated by many in Israel and abroad as a milestone for coexistence, while the Israeli right criticized the 2021-2022 government for what it characterized as working with the Muslim Brotherhood.

Monday's interview sparked headlines and analysis in right-leaning Israeli media and comments by politicians on the right about the viability of center and left-wing parties once again forming a coalition with

Ra'am to oust Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, when Ra'am's leader would not say that he is for eradicating Hamas.

**“The Muslim Brotherhood is a very generic term,” said Michael Milshtein, head of the Palestinian Studies Forum at the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University. “It’s not membership in an organization; it’s a denomination. Mansour Abbas is the Muslim Brotherhood. Raed Salah, his rival, is also the Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas is the Muslim Brotherhood. [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan is the Muslim Brotherhood.”**

The historic and recent connections between Hamas and Ra'am, both of which were founded by adherents of the Muslim Brotherhood, shed light on the nuances of the international Sunni Islamist movement and its status in Israel.

Michael Milshtein, head of the Palestinian Studies Forum at the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, emphasized, in an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Wednesday, that the Muslim Brotherhood is an ideology aiming to make Muslim societies more religious, and is not one centralized organization spanning the Muslim world.

“The Muslim Brotherhood is a very generic term,” Milshtein said. “It’s not membership in an organization; it’s a denomination. Mansour Abbas is the Muslim Brotherhood. Raed Salah, his rival, is also the Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas is the Muslim Brotherhood. [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan is the Muslim Brotherhood.”

Muslim Brotherhood founder Hasan al-Banna's brother, Abd al-Rahman al-Banna, founded the group's branch in Mandatory Palestine in 1935; its leaders included Mufti of Jerusalem Hajj Amin al-Husseini, who incited the deadly Hebron riots against Jews in 1929 and collaborated with Hitler, and Izz al-Din al-Qassam, leader of the 1935 Arab Revolt against the British and namesake of Hamas' short-range Qassam rockets.

Gaza-based Sheikh Ahmad Yasin formed the Muslim Brotherhood-inspired Hamas in the 1980s. Sheikh Abdullah Nimar Darwish founded the Islamic Movement in

Israel in 1971, which also espoused Muslim Brotherhood ideology.

In 1979, Darwish founded an underground group in Israel called The Family of Jihad with a goal of establishing an Islamic state. However, after his arrest and conviction for involvement in killing an accused collaborator and membership of a terrorist organization, he renounced violence and decided to promote Islamism within the confines of Israeli law.

Fissures began in the Islamic Movement in Israel after the Oslo Accords, with the northern branch, led by Sheikh Raed Salah, opposing it, while the southern branch supported it. The two parts of the movement officially split when the southern branch ran for the Knesset in 1996 as Ra'am, and Salah advocated boycotting national elections.

The leaders of the northern branch were arrested in 2003 for aiding Hamas and in 2015, the branch was banned, after the police and Shin Bet demonstrated that it had close ties to Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, and received funds from groups affiliated with Hamas.

Darwish, however, continued to be the spiritual leader of the Islamic Movement's southern branch and said he was committed to obeying the laws of Israel. He engaged in interfaith dialogue events, often with former Labor lawmaker Rabbi Michael Melchior, and spoke out against Holocaust denial.

While Islamic Movement Southern Branch leaders have met with Hamas leaders and taken part in mediation efforts between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, in 2022, then-leader of Hamas Yahya Sinwar declared Mansour Abbas a traitor for joining the governing coalition and saying Israel is a Jewish state. Abbas has said that his decision to join the governing coalition in 2021 came from the values he “absorbed from the legacy of Sheikh Abdullah Nimr Darwish.”

As such, the more radical of the two major offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood is outlawed in Israel.

Yet, more recently, the Islamic Movement Southern Branch has come under scrutiny for its own possible ties to Hamas.

In the decades since its establishment, the Islamic Movement has faced repeated crackdowns on its charities. The Islamic Relief Committee, founded in 1987 with

the stated goal to help the needy in the West Bank and Gaza, was shut down by Israeli authorities in 1995 for aiding Hamas members' families, the first in a series of such actions.

**“Israel’s anti-terrorism law and the whole discipline has been to focus on specific organizations and declaring them as terrorist organizations because of their goals, because of the means that they use, rather than focusing on an idea, which the Muslim Brotherhood really is,” Lt.-Col. (res.) Maurice Hirsch, the former director of the IDF Prosecution for Judea and Samaria, told JI.**

In July, the Israeli Justice Ministry unit dealing with nonprofit organizations found grounds to shut down “Aid 48,” a charity affiliated with Ra'am, on suspicion of providing funding to terrorist organizations. “Aid 48” is the Islamic Movement Southern Branch's main charity. According to an investigation by the ministry, in 2020-2021, the organization transferred NIS 2 million to a charity in Hebron that Israel had declared in 2012 to be part of a terrorist organization; in 2023, “Aid 48” worked with three such Palestinian charities; in 2020, the organization gave NIS 933,000 to a Turkish organization run by Hamas members, which funneled money to the terrorist organization.

Lt.-Col. (res.) Maurice Hirsch, the former director of the IDF Prosecution for Judea and Samaria, currently the director of the Initiative for Palestinian Authority Accountability and Reform in the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, explained to JI that Israeli law makes it easier to crack down on smaller subgroups than an umbrella term like the Muslim Brotherhood.

“Israel’s anti-terrorism law and the whole discipline has been to focus on specific organizations and declaring them as terrorist organizations because of their goals, because of the means that they use, rather than focusing on an idea, which the Muslim Brotherhood really is,” he said on the sidelines of a JCFA conference last week.

In order to declare the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, “you have to break it down into intelligence,”

Hirsch said, adding that the authorities would have to determine who they are seeking to arrest and what money and possibly weapons need to be seized.

Hirsch recounted taking part in the Israeli Security Cabinet meeting in 2015 when the government decided to outlaw the Islamic Movement Northern Branch.

“Some of the questions that were asked were, what is the next step? Who do we operate against now? It was a bit clearer than the entire Muslim Brotherhood, but even then there was a question,” he said.

**“I would be very careful because, at its core, the Muslim Brotherhood is a movement that aims to change society. They have a lot of social organizations. It’s very different from Islamic Jihad**

**or ISIS, who are not interested in social activism,” said Milshtein, adding that the Muslim Brotherhood ideology is up for interpretation by its adherents.**

When it comes to the southern branch, Hirsch, who has worked with the “Choosing Life” organization of relatives of victims of terror whose lawsuit led to the shuttering of “Aid 48,” argued that “there is a clear connection between Ra’am and funding Hamas ... That connection was there all along. It’s partly ideological and partly the idea of the Muslim Brotherhood in its different constellations, including in Israel.”

Milshtein acknowledged that there have been cases of leaders of “Aid 48” meeting with Hamas leaders and funding going to Hamas ahead of its invasion of Israel on Oct.

7, 2023, but said that Abbas “took care of” those responsible when he learned of the incidents.

“I would be very careful because, at its core, the Muslim Brotherhood is a movement that aims to change society. They have a lot of social organizations. It’s very different from Islamic Jihad or ISIS, who are not interested in social activism,” he said, adding that the Muslim Brotherhood ideology is up for interpretation by its adherents.

“If you ask Mansour Abbas, there is no problem with being part of the Muslim Brotherhood and part of the government in a state that defines itself as Jewish,” he said. “If you ask Hamas, they want jihad against Israel.” ♦

NOVEMBER 12, 2025

## New study shows influx of potential talent to Jewish nonprofits but barriers

By Jay Deitcher

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

Since its founding in 2014, Leading Edge’s work has been primarily focused on employee retention in the Jewish communal world, but its latest study zeroes in on tapping into the new talent flooding the market, particularly Gen Zers and former government and nonprofit workers who have lost their jobs due to recent cuts.

“The Jewish world already has great talent, and there’s lots more phenomenal talent that we’re not reaching, and we wanted to understand why,” Gali Cooks, president and CEO of Leading Edge, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*.

The study, “Talent Unlocked: Recruitment Solutions for the Jewish Nonprofit Sector,” surveyed over 3,300 potential Jewish nonprofit employees and conducted six focus groups, looking at how

both Jewish and non-Jewish potential workers viewed working in the Jewish nonprofit world. The survey, which was released in late October, was conducted in partnership with the research-analytics firm PBS Insights and was sponsored by Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies, Maimonides Fund and the Jim Joseph Foundation.

One lesson that the study revealed was that both Jewish and non-Jewish potential employees didn’t know enough about Jewish nonprofits or the work that they do. When potential employees realized the impact they could have working at a Jewish organization, both groups showed increased interest. Non-Jews also showed more interest when they realized that Jewish organizations often serve diverse clients, not only Jews, and that many organizations already had many non-Jewish leaders working there — another Leading Edge

study recently found that 38% of employees at Jewish nonprofits are not Jewish.

“The first step to the recruitment funnel [is] you have to be aware of something, then you can consider it, then you can actually put your hat in the ring for something, and then you’re hired,” Cooks said.

For most potential employees, salary is the biggest motivator. “If we want amazing talent, we have to pay for it,” Cooks said. “Even if you have a wonderful mission, even if your manager is going to be awesome, and even if there’s career opportunities,” if the compensation isn’t there at “the point of purchase,” when employees are considering jobs, they will choose one with the most pay and benefits.

The positive is that what matters isn’t simply salary, but “whole pay,” which includes benefits such as health-care plans, parental and family leave and professional development.

Many Jewish nonprofits are getting more creative with “whole pay,” subsidizing Jewish day schools, camps and synagogue memberships, and some federations match retirement benefits for employees at Jewish nonprofits.

Employers should realize there are major differences between hiring Gen Zers compared to previous generations. Gen Z places a high value on work-life balance and growth opportunities. Members of that generation are also more likely to switch jobs and industries within the next two years, the study showed, opening a huge opportunity for Jewish nonprofits.

The younger cohort is also more likely to be critical of Israel, which is why it’s essential that employers are clear about their position on Israel. If an employer isn’t transparent, employees will leave if their values don’t align down the line.

“Clarity is kindness,” Cooks said. Being open with employees from the start allows them to self-select. “There are some Gen Zers who are fiercely pro-Israel... and there’s

some that have a lot more complicated relationship with Israel.”

Mirroring the larger “Surge” into Jewish communal life post-Oct. 7, there is a surge of interest from Jews wanting to work in the Jewish world, with 30% of Jewish study participants saying they are more interested in working for a Jewish organization since the Israel-Hamas war began and 30% saying they are more interested in working for an organization that supports Israel. At the same time, new talent fears dealing with antisemitism by working at a Jewish organization, the study found.

A recent M<sup>2</sup> study found that current Jewish professionals lacked hope, and bringing in new talent thirsty to help can support those already working in the field who are dealing with burnout, Cooks said.

“You can’t sprint a marathon for two years without there being some fallout,” Cooks said, which is why it’s important to have “fresh pitching arms that could come in, and frankly, ways that we can give some opportunities for people to rest, to just

exhale before they go back into the game.”

The M<sup>2</sup> study showed that even though many Jewish community workers are overloaded, they believed their work had a positive impact on others.

“People are tired,” Cooks said. “It’s not just because they work at Jewish nonprofits. Living in the world right now is pretty complicated and overloaded. If anything, work is a touchstone. It’s an exhale. It’s a place where you can say, ‘Oh, my God, I can do something to make the world half of a percent better every week.’”

Recently, tens of thousands of federal workers have been laid off. Secular nonprofits have suffered massive cuts. Incredible talent has flooded the market, Cooks said, and Jewish nonprofits should “double down on” the messaging around the great work their employees are doing.

“They’re taking care of the community,” she said. “They’re teaching a child. They’re feeding the hungry. They’re helping Holocaust survivors. They’re making camp available to folks, which is magic.” ♦

NOVEMBER 12, 2025

## After Mamdani win, socialists look to challenge Democratic incumbents in NYC

*Pro-Israel Democratic Reps. Hakeem Jeffries, Ritchie Torres and Dan Goldman are facing long-shot challengers from the far left*

By Matthew Kassel

**T**he organized left scored a major victory last week when Zohran Mamdani was elected mayor of New York City, elevating to executive office a politician who became one of the nation’s most prominent democratic socialists during the campaign.

Now, as the movement seeks to ride momentum from Mamdani’s win and grow its influence at the federal level, some emerging challengers are setting their sights on a handful of pro-Israel Democrats in the House — posing what is likely to be the

first key test of its political credibility in the upcoming midterm elections.

While next year’s primaries are still more than six months away, some early signs indicate that the far left is already facing obstacles in its efforts to target established incumbents, raising questions about its organizational discipline and messaging ability, not to mention alignment with Mamdani — who is now walking a delicate path in seeking buy-in from state leadership to deliver on his ambitious affordability agenda.

Jake Dilemani, a Democratic consultant in New York, said “there is and should be euphoria among the left” after Mamdani’s victory, “but that does not necessarily translate into toppling relatively popular incumbents.”

“One swallow does not make a summer,” he told *Jewish Insider* on Tuesday.

In a pair of looming congressional contests in Brooklyn and the Bronx, for instance, potentially divided primary fields are now threatening to split the vote to oppose Reps. Dan Goldman (D-NY) and

Ritchie Torres (D-NY), both of whom are preparing to seek reelection amid left-wing backlash over their support for Israel.

Brad Lander, the outgoing comptroller and an ally of Mamdani, has told associates he is planning to challenge Goldman in a progressive district covering parts of Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan, people familiar with his thinking told *JI* recently.

Lander, who was reportedly boxed out of a top job in Mamdani's administration over conflict with the mayor-elect, has acknowledged that he is "seriously considering" a House bid, but has yet to confirm his timeline for publicly making a decision. One person familiar with the matter said he is likely to launch a bid after Mamdani assumes office in early January. Lander has denied that there are any tensions with Mamdani or his team.

While polling has shown that Lander would be a formidable challenger to Goldman, thanks to his popularity in the district where he once served as a longtime city councilman, some observers have speculated that he could face skepticism from voters who may see his bid as a consolation after failing to secure a role in City Hall.

Lander and Goldman were seen mingling at some of the same receptions during the Somos conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, last week, but did not appear to interact.

In addition to Lander, Alexa Avilés, a far-left city councilwoman closely aligned with the Democratic Socialists of America, is also weighing a challenge to Goldman, provoking fears among his critics who say he will benefit from a crowded field that helped him secure a narrow victory in his first House primary in 2022.

Yuh-Line Niou, a former state assemblywoman who placed second in that primary, has been considering another bid as well, sources told *JI*, after she lost by a margin of just two points in a race that centered in part on her controversial support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.

Goldman, for his part, has sought to downplay the role that Israel could play in the race, arguing that the Trump administration presents a more serious threat to his constituents.

But Avilés, for one, is almost certain to

raise Israel in a potential primary challenge, owing to her vocal opposition to the war in Gaza, which she has called a genocide, and outspoken criticism of AIPAC. "The tide is turning, but the forces remain pernicious and persistent," Avilés said during a panel discussion at Somos last week, warning of "a Congress that is very much controlled by AIPAC."

"Saying no to violence is not a radical idea," Avilés added in comments hinting at a challenge. "And you know what, y'all? If people are not stepping up, then we need to remove them."

In the Bronx, Torres, who is among the staunchest defenders of Israel in the House, has already drawn a primary opponent focusing overwhelmingly on his pro-Israel record and contributions from AIPAC, in an effort to channel the anti-establishment zeitgeist that helped boost Mamdani's insurgent campaign.

Michael Blake, a former state assemblyman who came in eighth place in the New York City mayoral primary, launched his campaign to unseat Torres last week. But he is facing accusations of hypocrisy over his own previous well-documented ties to AIPAC and past statements voicing strong support for Israel — contributing to a somewhat turbulent rollout that has cast doubts on his viability.

On the sidelines of the Somos retreat last Friday, Blake, who has twice visited Israel and spoken at AIPAC events, insisted that "you can be critical of governmental policies" and it "does not make you antisemitic or anti-Israel."

Blake, who also ran against Torres in a crowded primary in 2020, said he now supports an arms embargo on Israel, but clarified that, if elected, he would continue to vote for defensive aid for its Iron Dome missile-interception system — views that are unlikely to win converts among voters in Riverdale, a predominantly Jewish Bronx neighborhood where Torres has built a loyal following.

"I do think we have to be attentive of the moment that we're in right now," Blake said of his thinking last week, while confirming he would "absolutely" seek support from the DSA, which has so far only endorsed candidates running for state office next year.

**Marshall Wittmann, an AIPAC spokesperson, said that the group's "grassroots members understand the stakes in the upcoming midterms and that is why they are deeply motivated and engaged to help elect pro-Israel candidates and defeat detractors."**

Blake cross-endorsed with Mamdani in the primary and has enthusiastically supported the mayor-elect. But Torres, who once cautioned Mamdani was unfit to lead New York City because of his close ties to the DSA, has since spoken positively about the incoming mayor and praised one of his early appointments as "exceptional" on Monday, complicating the political fault lines in the primary.

A lesser-known primary challenger, Andre Easton, is also campaigning against Torres using similarly hostile rhetoric about Israel and AIPAC. Easton, an independent affiliated with the Party for Socialism and Liberation, has said he is running "to fight for the Bronx — not billionaires who fund genocide in Palestine," and claims that Torres "pockets money from AIPAC" while children in the district "live in poverty."

Marshall Wittmann, an AIPAC spokesperson, said that the group's "grassroots members understand the stakes in the upcoming midterms and that is why they are deeply motivated and engaged to help elect pro-Israel candidates and defeat detractors."

"The track record demonstrates that being pro-Israel is good policy and good politics as 96% of AIPAC endorsed Democrats won their elections last cycle," he added in a statement to *JI* on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, another pro-Israel Democrat, House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY), is expected to draw a more established far-left primary challenger in the coming weeks, setting up a high-profile fight for the Brooklyn House seat he has held for over a decade.

Chi Ossé, a young city councilman and Mamdani ally who has developed a sizable following on social media, is reportedly planning to seek support from the DSA, as he prepares to launch an insurgent bid to topple Jeffries, long a target of the far left. Ossé recently became a member of the DSA after quitting the group in 2020, he said

on social media in 2023, noting that when he first left he “wasn’t aligned with the organization” but that there was “no bad blood.”

Still, he may face resistance from Mamdani, who claimed an endorsement from Jeffries late in the election and is hoping to avoid intraparty conflict while balancing a tenuous coalition to advance his daunting campaign pledges. He has also distanced himself from the DSA’s most extreme positions and said their respective platforms are “not the same.”

**“It’s not clear that wins from election night will translate into intra-party primary victories in a midterm election,” Basil Smikle, a professor at Columbia’s School of Professional**

**Studies and a Democratic strategist, said on Tuesday. “There’s a lot of time between now and then but the organizing framework has certainly been established to make a strong run.”**

Mamdani, who criticized Jeffries’ pro-Israel views before the mayoral election, had reportedly sought to preempt Ossé’s plans to oppose the congressman who could be the next speaker of the House. As the councilman now moves forward against Mamdani’s apparent wishes, the potential primary battle could place the mayor-elect in an uncomfortable position, possibly fueling tensions with an activist base eager to capitalize on his victory. The DSA did not return a request for comment.

Despite such issues, some experts said that the left remains formidable ahead of next year’s primaries, even as it confronts some potential disorganization.

“It’s not clear that wins from election night will translate into intra-party primary victories in a midterm election,” Basil Smikle, a professor at Columbia’s School of Professional Studies and a Democratic strategist, said on Tuesday. “There’s a lot of time between now and then but the organizing framework has certainly been established to make a strong run.”

Hank Sheinkopf, a veteran Democratic strategist, said that “every pro-Israel Democrat is a target for the newly empowered DSA BDS gang,” and warned that incumbents “should be prepared for a long and costly battle.” ♦

NOVEMBER 11, 2025

## Prolonged shutdown ‘distresses’ food assistance recipients, strains nonprofits stepping in to help

*Even as Congress moves to reopen government, the slashing of SNAP benefits has already taken a toll*

By Nira Dayanim, Jay Deitcher

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

After weeks of uncertainty about when, how much and if SNAP benefits would reach recipients, on Friday, Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont, a Democrat, announced a full return of SNAP benefits funded by the state.

The next morning, people rushed to grocery stores after seeing their Electronic Balance Transfer card balances jump to pre-government shutdown levels, spending their money in full because they feared it would once again vanish. Later that same day, news emerged that the Trump administration was demanding that states

claw back their funding. Many wondered, had their situation worsened? Did they now owe the government money?

For Jewish family services professionals, this weekend served as yet another twist in a grueling month.

Since Nov. 1, due to the ongoing government shutdown, many of the roughly 42 million people who qualify for SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits have faced an empty balance on their EBT cards. Although some states issued partial benefits — and two federal courts have ordered the administration to disburse benefits — the Supreme Court temporarily stayed those

rulings. In turn, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which administers the SNAP program, has told states that the distribution of full benefits is unauthorized and must be reversed.

On Monday, the Senate voted to advance a stopgap funding bill, potentially paving the way for the government to reopen. Even so, SNAP benefits will not be disbursed immediately, and the past 11 days of cut benefits have already taken a toll on recipients.

According to Shelley Rood Wernick, associate vice president of the Jewish Federation of North America’s Center on Aging, Trauma and Holocaust Survivor

Care, many Holocaust survivors live below the poverty line and therefore rely on SNAP benefits. Although many Jewish organizations provide supplemental support, the ongoing uncertainty has caused distress for the population, she said.

“One thing that Holocaust survivors have in common, they all have many different wartime experiences, but one thing they all had in common was lack of food,” Rood Wernick told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. “And here to be threatened again, with the lack of food feels very... stressful is not even the right word to use. It’s incredibly distressing.”

Included in the 300 families served by Jewish Family Services of Greater Hartford (Conn.)’s food pantry, 90 recipients are Holocaust survivors.

“We have people coming to our doors, and how do you look them in the face and tell them, ‘No, we can’t help you?’” said Katie Hanley, CEO of the Hartford JFS, told eJP. “So we are trying to raise more money. We are buying more food to give it out as quickly as we can, and we know it’s not enough. At some point, you just have to acknowledge how demoralizing this is.”

Since the start of November, the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty, America’s largest Jewish anti-poverty organization, has surged food to its over 200 network pantries across New York City. Increasing supplies by up to 50% for one week cost the organization around \$500,000 in private dollars, David Greenfield, the group’s CEO and executive director, told eJP.

“We’re putting a Band-Aid on what is essentially a gunshot wound, and it is all of the government’s making,” Greenfield said. “It’s very real. A lot of these times when we talk about a situation or a crisis, there’s folks who just assume, ‘Well, people will figure it out.’ There is no solution over here. There is no way to figure this out.”

Across the country, Jewish welfare nonprofits and food banks are increasingly strained as they attempt to meet the growing wave of need.

“The issue with nonprofits is we are kind of organizationally accustomed to a scarcity mindset and an uncertainty mindset,” Hanley said. “We don’t know if a

fundraiser is going to work the way we had budgeted for. We don’t know what needs our clients are going to have given whatever situation they have in life, so uncertainty is not usually a concern for us. It’s something that we’ve learned how to cope with. This is a whole new level of uncertainty.”

Jewish Child and Family Services Chicago is “not a food insecurity organization,” Stacey Shor, the group’s president and CEO, told eJP, “but we are an emotional well-being organization.”

Today, that distinction has become largely irrelevant. According to Shor, the uncertainty and anxiety caused by the SNAP stoppage has caused “a mental health crisis” — one her agency could not look away from.

“We can’t have our people not eating. I know it’s not our responsibility,” she said, but “as Jewish people, it absolutely is our responsibility.”

For the month of November, any JCFS Chicago clients who had their benefits suspended can ask the agency to feed them. The first day after they announced this, last Wednesday, 100 clients asked for help. If all 1,000 clients who are estimated to receive SNAP benefits accept their help, it will cost the agency \$500,000, which Shor said the organization could not sustain for more than a month.

“As generous as our charitable community is,” Shor said, “donors and private charity cannot make up for the government.”

The ability of staff to give clients a tangible gift also helps the mental health of those who work at JCFS Chicago, as they feel increasingly powerless. Shor herself once relied on food benefits during her youth, when her father was in podiatry school and earning a resident’s salary.

She sees this as “a dress rehearsal for what’s about to come,” expecting more people to lose access to SNAP as the Trump administration’s One Big Beautiful Bill Act — an act she refuses to call by that name — cuts eligibility for more Americans. “We’re seeing what the pressure is going to be on the system when that time comes.”

The Ark in Chicago, which offers a health clinic, pharmacy, financial assistance, legal

assistance, mental health counseling and two kosher food pantries that are open five days a week, is pushing clients to take advantage of more of their services so former SNAP recipients can put all their resources towards feeding their family and don’t have to choose between food, housing and medicating a sick elder, Marna Goldwin, CEO of The Ark, told eJP.

Over 5,000 people use their services, 3,000 of whom access their pantries. Many clients have shifted the food they take from pantries. Instead of a kosher chicken for Shabbat dinner, they are grabbing nonperishables that will stretch for longer.

“If the last few weeks did anything positive, they have helped to educate the community of the magnitude of neighbors who depend on government support for basic food assistance and reinforced the paradigm of cooperation that should exist between the nonprofit sector and government,” Reuben Rotman, president and CEO at Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies, told eJP.

For Albany, NY’s Shalom Food Pantry, which serves over 100 households, the past several weeks have been an opportunity for the Capital District community — Jewish and not-Jewish — to unite for a common cause. Chanie Simon, program coordinator of the Chabad-run pantry, told eJP that she has watched the entire community join together. Synagogues collected food. Other food pantries reached out to ask if they needed anything and sometimes asked for assistance themselves. The entire Capital District was ready to step up.

“The phone’s been ringing nonstop,” Simon said. “Everybody is just working together to get the needs met.”

Just like Jewish families provide food for new moms after a birth because it’s a time to rest, she said, people should realize that “there should be no embarrassment in needing to take during this time. That’s what community is here for, to support one another. There’s a time to give and there’s a time to take.”

Providing support is “our way of giving everybody a hug,” she said. “Making sure that everybody is fed.” ♦

# Black and Jewish college students explore shared adversity and allyship at DC-area ‘Unity Dinner’

*Sponsored by Robert Kraft’s Blue Square Alliance, Hillel International and the United Negro College Fund, the event brought together over 100 students in an effort to rebuild the Black-Jewish alliance of the Civil Rights Movement*

By Gabby Deutch

The official reason that more than 100 college students from across Washington gathered in a ballroom at George Washington University last week was for a formal dinner billed as an opportunity to build bridges between the Black and Jewish communities.

But what really got the students — undergrads from GWU, American, George Mason, Georgetown, Howard and the University of the District of Columbia — talking at this event, which was meant to highlight commonalities and spark deep connections between students from different backgrounds, was a breezy icebreaker: Is a hot dog a sandwich?

That was one of several lighthearted prompts for the students to discuss as they settled into dinner and got to know each other at tables of 10. Later, after they had introduced themselves and playfully debated topics like who would play them in a movie and their least favorite internet trends, the students turned to more personal questions about identity, community and belonging. It was an exercise carefully calibrated to build connection free from rancor, where the students could speak about themselves and their identities as racial and religious minorities without fear of judgment.

“Every single time, I am amazed at the discussion and how vulnerable people will be,” said Arielle Levy, vice president of diversity, equity and inclusion at Hillel International. Levy shepherded the students through the increasingly more serious questions during last week’s dinner program. “I just really hope it leads to action, because that’s really what we’re hoping for.”

Formally dubbed the “Unity Dinner,” the event was sponsored by Robert Kraft’s

Blue Square Alliance, Hillel International and the United Negro College Fund. The Washington event was one of 14 such events taking place in cities across the country this academic year. It is an expansion on a pilot project, which began last year with the core belief that rebuilding the storied — but strained — Black-Jewish alliance of the Civil Rights Movement must start at a grassroots, interpersonal level. After seven unity dinners last year connecting Black and Jewish students, the funders became convinced that supporting dialogue in intimate settings like this is one of the best ways to fight hate.

“You see this micro-connection that starts to build understanding and awareness,” Tara Levine, Blue Square Alliance’s chief partnership officer, told *Jewish Insider* at the dinner. “Then over time, that builds empathy, and that becomes something that students share with one another, within their communities, across communities. It is ultimately how we address the underlying divide and start to overcome some of the hate that we’re seeing.”

The students all had different reasons for coming. Some wanted to meet new people. Others were excited by the prospect of putting off homework for a few hours. Several learned of it from professors who piqued their curiosity.

“I actually take a class on the Holocaust and modern-day politics at Howard University, and my professor is Jewish, and he told us about the specific event that we could come out to,” said Joy Baker, a freshman at the historically Black university. “We were automatically interested.”

The whole idea of bringing Black and Jewish students together over dinner, with no agenda beyond getting to know

one another, began in Atlanta with John Eaves, a professor at Spelman College who is both Black and Jewish. He is well-versed in the history of Black and Jewish activists working together during the Civil Rights Movement; his own synagogue, The Temple, was bombed for its support of civil rights in 1958 — but now, Eaves sees that knowledge has lapsed among younger generations in both communities.

“One day, I heard a Baptist preacher tell me that he felt that Jews were unlikely allies. What?” said Eaves, who is also the program director of the Tikkun Olam Initiative and Social Innovation Fund at the United Negro College Fund, an organization that provides financial support to historically Black colleges and universities. “That spoke to the possibility, but it also spoke to the challenge. They’re allies, but he did not think of Jews as allies. I see this as planting the seed.”

The discussions don’t directly touch on Israel, but the dinner organizers said that the events happening in the Middle East have not kept people away from the events. The main impact Eaves has seen is on American Jews’ wariness toward once-allied communities who they felt had abandoned them after the Oct. 7 attacks two years ago. He encouraged Jews, even those who still feel raw, to not yet write off their wayward allies, and to follow the lead of the college students.

“I think the Jewish community felt sucker punched by Oct. 7, and felt like there’s very few people who have been there for us. There’s a degree of sensitivity right now, in terms of ‘nobody’s really there for us,’” said Eaves.

“This type of thing is doable. The Jewish community has to understand the power of the ask, not minimize our ability to make the

ask. People respond in a positive way. That's the piece that I think is missing, the limited number of asks that are made," Eaves added. "Make the ask. All people can say is no."

At tables throughout the room, over soda and parve desserts, students spoke from the heart: What brings them pride in their community? What gives them a sense of belonging? When have they felt fully free? And were there any commonalities in the answers of students from different backgrounds?

Baker, the Howard student, said she learned things that surprised her, "like how much the Jewish community and the Black community are low key kind of the same."

By the end of the night, the room was abuzz with the excited chatter of new friends, who had already set up group chats and followed each other on Instagram. Most said they planned to attend a Passover Seder at Howard in the spring, but many hope to meet up sooner — made easier by grants available from Hillel International to

encourage continued dialogue.

The students smiled and laughed as they walked out the door, talking with people they did not know two hours ago. They each were carrying something that is sure to excite all college students, regardless of race, religion or university: a free T-shirt from the event. ♦

NOVEMBER 11, 2025

## At WJC gala, Ronald Lauder says education, PR are only way to combat antisemitism

*At the annual event, the organization honored Rep. Elise Stefanik and Sen. John Fetterman for their allyship on Israel and antisemitism*

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By Haley Cohen

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

In the wake of a global rise in antisemitism, World Jewish Congress President Ronald Lauder told some 250 attendees at the organization's annual gala dinner on Monday that the "only" solution is "creating more Jewish schools" and "taking the high ground in public relations."

"The entire education system — K-12 to college — must be retaught. Laws must be passed that will focus on no racism, no antisemitism and no anti-Western civilization being taught," said Lauder. "It's [also] time we fight back with stronger PR

to tell the truth about [antisemitism and Israel]. If Israel doesn't want to do this, we in the Diaspora will help.

"I don't blame Jewish organizations for not being prepared" for the Oct. 7 terror attacks in Israel and their aftermath, continued Lauder. "[But] all of these groups don't know how to [combat antisemitism]. Frankly, they're wasting a lot of money. Education and public relations are the only [answers]."

The event, held at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan, honored Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-NY) and Sen. John Fetterman (D-PA) with WJC's Theodor Herzl award

for the lawmakers' pro-Israel advocacy and opposition to antisemitism.

Stefanik, who announced earlier this week she is running for governor of New York in the 2026 election, told the audience she plans to continue "exposing the truth about how antisemitism is normalized and institutionalized in American higher education."

"I will not stop until accountability is real and until every Jewish student in this country can walk across campus without fear," she said.

"As I look around my beloved home state, I know there is another battle that now

demands our focus,” continued Stefanik, speaking nearly a week after the election of democratic socialist Zohran Mamdani as mayor of New York City. “Today, New York is not just a city and state in crisis, it is the epicenter in the fight for democracy, capitalism and dignity of work.”

Bernadette Breslin, spokesperson for Stefanik, told *Jewish Insider* after the event that, if elected governor, “Stefanik will enforce and strengthen New York’s anti-BDS law.”

“Our office works with Jewish schools in New York State to provide increased

Nonprofit Security Grant Program funding from DHS as well as state funding for protecting the safety and security of Jewish students,” she told JI. “[Stefanik] is also a proud co-sponsor of the Countering Hate Against Israel by Federal Contractors Act which would prohibit the federal government from contracting with entities that boycott Israel. We will institute this at the state level. She will continue to fight against the antisemitic BDS movement in New York State like she has done in Congress.”

Lauder voiced support for Stefanik’s

campaign launch. “Our hearts are with you as our next governor in New York,” he said to applause.

Fetterman gave virtual remarks from Washington, where he remained to vote on an effort to end the government shutdown. “The proudest thing I’ve done in my entire Senate career is to stand with Israel and the Jewish community worldwide through this horrible war in Gaza. My voice is going to follow Israel,” he said. ♦

NOVEMBER 10, 2025

## Jewish leaders begin outreach to incoming Mamdani administration, sensitively

*At the post-election Somos conference, Jewish officials tried to find areas of common ground with the new mayor*

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By Matthew Kassel

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — The humid air was swelling with anticipation as thousands of New York politicians descended on Puerto Rico’s capital last week to attend the annual Somos conference, a multiday marathon of post-election elbow-rubbing where receptions and panels occur alongside covert negotiations and late-night schmoozing at local bars and hotels.

The extended Democratic gathering, which kicked off on Wednesday and continued into the weekend, was adjusting to the ascendant political order led by Zohran Mamdani, whose victory in New York City’s mayoral election earlier that week had upended the Democratic establishment and led to new alliances that until recently would have seemed improbable.

While Mamdani was still largely unknown during Somos last year, just weeks after announcing his long-shot mayoral bid, the 34-year-old democratic socialist and state assemblyman now seized the spotlight

as attendees swarmed his arrival Thursday at the Caribe Hilton, where the incoming mayor was later fêted by some of the state’s top elected officials at a crowded beachside reception.

For many Jewish leaders who joined the Caribbean confab, however, the feeling was far more subdued, as they openly grappled with the sensitive question of how to work with a mayor-elect whose stridently anti-Israel views conflict with their own core values.

It is a wholly unfamiliar position for Jewish leaders and mainstream Jewish institutions in New York City, where the mayors have long been proudly pro-Israel. But Mamdani’s stunning rise challenged the conventional thinking that a winning candidate in New York, a place with the largest Jewish community of any city in the world, must show strong support for Israel. In breaking with decades of precedent, Mamdani still faced skepticism from a

significant number of Jewish voters who cast their ballots for former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who lost the Democratic primary and then ran as an independent. Exit polls showed that Cuomo, a vocal supporter of Israel, had doubled Mamdani among Jewish New Yorkers, with around two-thirds of the vote.

As Mamdani prepares to assume office in less than two months, Jewish leaders mingling at Somos were freshly processing his looming mayoralty with a mix of shock, hesitation and bemused detachment. Even if some voiced hope for a positive relationship, most were not ready to specify how they planned to move forward or what was expected of his administration.

One well-connected Jewish attendee cited the five stages of grief in characterizing the reactions among Jewish community leaders who had largely resisted engaging with Mamdani’s campaign. Many of them, it seemed, were dealing with the first stage of

denial — and were far from finally reaching acceptance.

“We’re so screwed,” one Jewish political activist was overheard lamenting at an event on Friday evening.

Still, some Jewish community leaders who spoke with Jewish Insider over the course of the retreat suggested they were willing to give Mamdani the latitude to follow through on areas where they are aligned, pointing to a sort of provisional detente in the aftermath of a bruising and emotionally fraught election.

“The mainstream Jewish community is open to dealing with reality,” Noam Gilboord, the chief operating and community relations officer at the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, said diplomatically while attending the conference.

The JCRC, for its part, has not yet held any direct meetings with Mamdani, though members of his team privately reached out about some key issues during the election and have continued to stay in touch, according to Mark Treyger, the group’s chief executive. The campaign gave a heads-up to JCRC leadership, for instance, before Mamdani publicly announced that he would ask Jessica Tisch to stay on as police commissioner, an encouraging choice to Jewish community leaders who favored her for the role.

**“We are here to represent the transition with the Jewish community, and we’re so happy to be here,” Ali Najmi, a Mamdani confidante and chief counsel to the mayor-elect’s transition team, told JI in a brief exchange. “We see so many good friends and old friends, and we’re so looking forward to our new friends.”**

Mamdani’s team also checked in with the JCRC after he had won the primary to give assurances that the newly anointed Democratic nominee was committed to providing continued security for its annual Israel Day on Fifth parade — even if he was unlikely to attend, as a supporter of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against the Jewish state.

While Mamdani was absent from a Thursday night reception the JCRC hosted with the UJA-Federation of New York, he

sent two of his top aides, Ali Najmi and Elle Bisgaard-Church, to join the event instead. They were warmly greeted by attendees in a public easing of tensions that would have been difficult to imagine just a few weeks ago.

“We are here to represent the transition with the Jewish community, and we’re so happy to be here,” Najmi, a Mamdani confidante and chief counsel to the mayor-elect’s transition team, told JI in a brief exchange. “We see so many good friends and old friends, and we’re so looking forward to our new friends.”

Najmi did not share further details regarding the transition’s formal plans to address Jewish issues, steps that are certain to be aggressively scrutinized in the coming months.

Yeruchim Silber, the director of New York government relations at Agudath Israel of America, an Orthodox advocacy group, said he appreciated the outreach and looked forward to meeting with Najmi again. “We’re hopeful that we could always find some common ground and work together,” he told JI during the reception. “Look, the mayor-elect said very clearly in his victory speech that he’s going to tackle antisemitism,” he added, “so we’ll take him at his word.”

“My understanding is there is interest in more formal Jewish outreach” from Mamdani’s team, said Phylisa Wisdom, the executive director of New York Jewish Agenda, a liberal Zionist group that has been receptive to the mayor-elect. Wisdom, who joined a private conversation with Mamdani at a Reform synagogue in Brooklyn before the election, said the appearance of his aides at the reception on Thursday demonstrated “a desire to be in all kinds of Jewish spaces they may not have been during the election,” in order to “build relationships and show goodwill.”

**“This is a very, very divided time for the city, I think I can acknowledge that,” Mark Levine, the incoming city comptroller who endorsed Mamdani, said in his remarks to the room.**

Mamdani, whose presence at formal Somos events drew throngs of eager admirers seeking selfies with the mayor-elect, likewise steered clear of an annual

Shabbat gathering convened by the Met Council, the Jewish anti-poverty charity. Despite his victory, the event, which featured Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-NY), New York state Attorney General Letitia James and other prominent officials, made no direct allusion to Mamdani — further highlighting his uncomfortable relationship with the Jewish community.

Instead, the speakers at the Met Council’s widely attended reception zeroed in largely on such issues as hunger, poverty and the Trump administration’s efforts to withhold payments for food stamps amid the government shutdown.

“This is a very, very divided time for the city, I think I can acknowledge that,” Mark Levine, the incoming city comptroller who endorsed Mamdani, said in his remarks to the room.

Levine, who is Jewish, is now facing pressure from some Mamdani allies to divest the city from Israel bonds. He has refused to change course, saying last week that he has “criticism of the Israeli government” but still maintains “deep personal ties to Israel.” Mamdani, meanwhile, has voiced support for ending “the practice of purchasing Israel bonds,” though Levine has indicated he does not believe the mayor-elect has the power to enforce such a policy.

The Shabbat reception was disrupted by anti-Israel protesters two years ago, weeks after Hamas’ Oct. 7, 2023, attacks. But no such demonstrations occurred last Friday.

Mamdani, who will soon become New York City’s first Muslim and South Asian mayor, has frequently vowed to fight rising antisemitism. The day after the election, he swiftly moved to condemn vandalism of a Jewish day school in Brooklyn that was defaced by swastika graffiti, calling the attack a “disgusting and heartbreaking act of antisemitism” and pledging to “always stand steadfast with our Jewish neighbors to root the scourge of antisemitism out of our city.”

In his outreach to different parts of the Jewish community and in his public remarks during the election, Mamdani called for increased funding to prevent hate crimes and boosting police protection at Jewish institutions. He has expressed interest in a city curriculum backed by leading Jewish groups, even as it uses a definition of Zionism contradicting his own

views on Israel. Mamdani has said he does not recognize Israel as a Jewish state.

Despite his pledges to counter antisemitism, that tension underscores how many Jewish leaders see his positions as an active threat and an impediment to upholding support for Israel, as the war in Gaza has fueled deep divisions in the Democratic Party.

Mamdani's anti-Israel stances have provoked concerns that he will act on his views when he takes office. He has indicated, for instance, that he would reassess the partnership between Cornell University and Israel's Technion, situated on Roosevelt Island. He has also pledged to arrest Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for war crimes if he steps foot in New York City, in a controversial move that legal experts have questioned as legally dubious.

Mamdani has faced scrutiny for his ties to the Democratic Socialists of America, whose avowedly anti-Zionist mission includes demands that the mayor-elect implement several policies that would sever New York City's relations with Israel. His refusal to explicitly condemn calls to "globalize the intifada" have otherwise continued to frustrate Jewish community leaders.

Robert Tucker, a Jewish philanthropist who had served as the commissioner of New York City's Fire Department until last week, announced that he was resigning after Mamdani's win, reportedly owing to the mayor-elect's anti-Zionist stances.

But some Jewish leaders at Somos speculated that Mamdani may now see his vocal opposition to Israel as an albatross as he seeks to enact an ambitious affordability plan that will need buy-in from the state leadership.

During his time at Somos, the mayor-elect seemed careful to largely avoid the issue. "I will make clear that we are not looking to remake New York City in my image," he said in remarks at a labor breakfast Saturday. "We are looking to remake it in the image of struggling workers across the five boroughs."

In comments to a mosque he visited in San Juan, where the imam had mentioned Palestine during his own sermon, Mamdani spoke in metaphorical terms as he addressed the audience. "If you are not at the table, you

may find yourself on the menu," he noted. "It was a Muslim brother, Malcolm X, who reminded us that sitting at the table does not make you a diner. You have to be eating some of what's on that plate."

Still, some of Mamdani's allies on the far left indicated that they were eager to use momentum from his victory to push a more hostile view of Israel into the mainstream discourse and to challenge incumbents who accept donations from AIPAC while promoting pro-Israel policies.

In a panel discussion on Thursday billed as "Colonialism, Resistance and Solidarity: Puerto Rico and Palestine," Mamdani's supporters — including City Councilmember Alexa Avilés, Beth Miller of Jewish Voice for Peace Action and Linda Sarsour, a Palestinian-American activist who has spread antisemitic rhetoric — were emboldened by his recent win, as attendees chanted "From the river to the sea, Palestina will be free!" and "Viva, viva Palestina!" Sarsour described Mamdani's election as "a new day" and said "we're not going back."

"Being someone who supports the Palestinian people is no longer a political liability," Sarsour, who has vowed to hold Mamdani "accountable" as mayor, told the room. "It is what gets you elected into office."

In statements following the election, a range of Jewish organizations promised to hold Mamdani responsible for keeping Jews in New York City safe. The mayor-elect's "victory marks the beginning of a new political chapter for New York, one that many in our community view with enormous concern," Eric Goldstein, the CEO of the UJA-Federation of New York, said in a letter to supporters. "His rhetoric on Israel and Zionism raises serious questions about whether Jewish New Yorkers will continue to feel seen and protected in the very city we indelibly helped build and grow."

He said the Jewish community would be watching closely to ensure "that antisemitism is not given any oxygen in our neighborhoods," adding that "actions matter more" than "words."

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsh, who leads Stephen Wise Free Synagogue on Manhattan's Upper West Side, said in a post-election sermon that he "will readily engage in dialogue" with Mamdani if he chooses to reach out. "We will support Mayor Mamdani's policies

where we can — and oppose them when we must," he concluded.

**New York Gov. Kathy Hochul, who, at Somos, celebrated Mamdani's win, also stressed to reporters on the sidelines of the conference that Jewish New Yorkers still need to "see action" from the mayor-elect to address their concerns. "That's one area where I know that there's some opportunities for him to demonstrate, as he has said, but also demonstrate that he is there to protect all New Yorkers, to protect anyone's right to worship or their beliefs but also their institutions," she explained.**

The Anti-Defamation League, for its part, launched a "Mamdani Monitor" to track policies that could impact Jewish safety and security. Jewish leaders in attendance at Somos, however, voiced reservations with the effort, suggesting they did not see it as productive as some in the community look for common ground to work with the mayor-elect.

Others voiced hope that a leading candidate for City Council speaker, Julie Menin, who is Jewish, would serve as a counterweight to Mamdani — in contrast with a leftist rival, Crystal Hudson, seen more as an ally of the mayor-elect. Menin, who declined to join a meeting between Mamdani and Jewish officials in the primary, is known as an outspoken supporter of Israel in the City Council.

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Hochul, for her part, has also drawn backlash from Jewish donors for choosing to back Mamdani's campaign in the general election, people familiar with the situation told JI. "She's got a lot to prove," one Jewish leader said of the governor, long regarded as

a staunch defender of Israel.

Rep. Dan Goldman (D-NY), a pro-Israel Jewish Democrat who declined to endorse Mamdani in the general election, told JI at Somos that, despite their disagreements on Israel, he was looking forward to working with the mayor-elect on areas of alignment such as cost of living issues.

But some Jewish community activists were more suspicious of the incoming mayor. One Brooklyn organizer dismissed

the possibility of working with Mamdani outright, saying that his stances on Israel had foreclosed any hope of finding common ground, even on unrelated issues.

Leon Goldenberg, an Orthodox business leader in Brooklyn who serves as an executive board member of the Flatbush Jewish Community Coalition, which endorsed Cuomo in the general election, told JI that he has been struggling to decide whether he will ask Mamdani for a meeting.

"I'm really at a loss," he said on Thursday. "What are we going to talk about, Israel?"

The FJCC itself, which long enjoyed a close relationship with outgoing Mayor Eric Adams, was more optimistic, according to Josh Mehlman, the group's chairman. "We have met, and will meet with them again," he said of Mamdani's team. "We are confident we can work together for the best interest of the Flatbush community and the Orthodox Jewish community citywide." ♦

NOVEMBER 10, 2025

## The influencer couple selling Syria on Capitol Hill

*Jasmine Naamou and Tarek Naemo, a Florida couple advocating closer U.S.–Syria ties, have courted lawmakers including Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, Rep. Joe Wilson and even House Speaker Mike Johnson as they promote Damascus in D.C.*

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By Gabby Deutch

**T**he fall of Bashar al-Assad's brutal regime in Syria last December happened slowly, and then all at once — leaving a region reeling from whiplash and a country digging itself out from the rubble, now under the leadership of a former militia head who cut his teeth as an Al-Qaida terrorist.

This week, that leader, Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa, is coming to Washington, the first time a Syrian president has ever been invited to the White House.

Alongside al-Sharaa's rise in Damascus has been a flurry of activity in Washington, as lawmakers tried to make sense of a country that one day was considered a rogue nation locked in protracted civil war and the next was viewed as a free state on the path to stability.

Two people in particular have become fixtures on Capitol Hill, pushing the message that Washington should lift sanctions on Damascus and build stronger ties with Syria: Jasmine Naamou and Tarek Naemo, a married couple who live in Daytona Beach, Fla., with a knack for social media self-promotion and a willingness to strike up a conversation with anyone.

On the eve of al-Sharaa's meeting with President Donald Trump, the couple

arranged a meeting with the Syrian leader and Rep. Brian Mast (R-FL), chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Naamou and Naemo first came to Capitol Hill this year as activists with the Syrian American Alliance for Peace and Prosperity, a nonprofit that emerged early this year to advocate for closer ties between the U.S. and Syria, though Naamou said she doesn't work directly with them anymore. The organization arranged meetings for Syria's foreign minister in New York this year, and in April it brought two members of Congress — Reps. Cory Mills (R-FL) and Marlin Stutzman (R-IN) — to Syria for the first visit by U.S. officials in years. Naamou and Naemo were on the trip with them.

Mills and Stutzman's visit preceded a more senior delegation, with Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Rep. Joe Wilson (R-SC), who has held several senior foreign policy roles, visiting the country together.

All of those lawmakers have met with either Naamou or Naemo this year, documented with slick photos shared on the couple's Instagram accounts. Naamou has 319,000 followers, and a pinned photo with House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA);

Naemo has 2.2 million followers and flaunts photos with the Saudi investment minister and Turkey's ambassador to Syria — plus an image of him holding a rifle and sitting on a golf cart with Wilson. He refers to Wilson as "my dearest friend."

Naamou spoke to *Jewish Insider* on Friday ahead of al-Sharaa's visit to preview what she hopes the Syrian leader will discuss with Trump, with normalization with Israel high on the list.

"We want regional stability. Israel's a neighbor. They're a friend of America. We want them to be friends of Syria. We want to normalize relations," said Naamou, who was driving to the airport, bound for Washington to be there for al-Sharaa's visit. She also expressed hope for a U.S. security presence in Syria: "I believe they're moving in the right direction of getting that security agreement in place. From what I've heard, they are in discussions of having a U.S. air base in Damascus to help with those security discussions between Syria and Israel. So I really do see the steps moving in the right direction."

Ahead of his visit, the United Nations lifted sanctions on al-Sharaa, a move that followed a similar executive order by Trump in June. "President Trump is committed to

supporting a Syria that is stable, unified and at peace with itself and its neighbors,” the White House said at the time.

Naamou and her husband both work in real estate in central Florida, though they also have ties to a Saudi sovereign wealth fund, according to *Intelligence Online*, a publication focused on diplomacy. Naamou said investment is a focus of their advocacy to American officials.

“They’re also going to have discussions on reintegrating investments in Syria because President Trump, when he went over to Saudi Arabia on his Middle East trip, he had announced the whole cessation of sanctions,” said Naamou.

Florida oceanside city become such fixtures on Capitol Hill? Naamou, who is 30, dates her own advocacy to her college days at the University of Florida, where she studied international relations and political science because of what was happening in

Syria. She said the political relationships started back home in Florida, too.

“I live in Volusia County, and it’s a relatively small county, and everyone kind of knows each other,” she said. “You just go to events, and you meet people, and things happen, and you discuss things, and then you find things in common.”

They’ve also met with Reps. Byron Donalds (R-FL), who is running for governor of Florida; Anna Paulina Luna (R-FL); Maxine Waters (D-CA) and Abe Hamadeh (R-AZ), who is the child of Syrian immigrants.

“I see huge bipartisan support now,” Naamou said. “We like to term Syria as a swing state. Syria is multi-layered. Syria is one of the only countries in the Middle East that is so complex. You have all three Abrahamic religions present in Syria. You have all different types of ethnicities present. And so Syria is very key in the

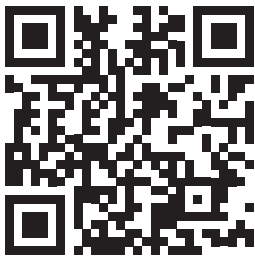
region, because it can be swung either way.”

“Either way,” in this case, means West or East — bringing Syria into the U.S.-led Western world, or into the Russia-Iran-China orbit.

“They want the U.S., and they want to acclimate here with our values,” said Naamou, who was born in Michigan to a Syrian father. She described the rapid changes in Syria as a “snowball effect.”

“I’ve never seen, when a regime has fallen, such a fast paced amount of change happen in such a short period of time,” said Naamou. She wants to see it continue: all sanctions lifted, American investment, closer ties.

“I’m hoping that we see a larger acceptance of Syria in general,” she said. “I’m hoping that we’re able to somehow, in any way, reshape the narrative into a positive light.” ♦



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