

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

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JANUARY 8, 2026

## U.S. lawmakers weigh in on fears of Saudi Arabia accommodating Islamists

*The lawmakers downplayed reports of a serious Gulf rift, with Rep. Brad Sherman calling the increasing disputes between neighbors 'tactical, not ideological'*

By Marc Rod, Emily Jacobs

**L**awmakers in Washington are largely downplaying recent developments suggesting that Saudi Arabia is pivoting away from moderation and entertaining more hardline Islamism.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have been at loggerheads in Sudan, Somalia and Yemen — including a recent Saudi airstrike on an Emirati shipment in southern Yemen — prompting questions about Riyadh's continued interest in acting as a moderating force in the region.

Saudi Arabia has also sided with Muslim Brotherhood-aligned forces in other regional conflicts, is increasing its business ties with Qatar and softening its stance toward other

Islamist powers hostile to Israel, among other steps, some analysts say.

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud met with lawmakers on Capitol Hill on Wednesday, who came away from the meeting indicating that potential disputes or shifts in the kingdom had been overstated.

Rep. Brad Sherman (D-CA) — who has been critical of Saudi Arabia in the past — told *Jewish Insider* that Prince Faisal, in the meeting, sought to directly rebut claims that Saudi Arabia was pivoting away from a position of moderation.

The overall message from Prince Faisal, Sherman said, was “the Saudis claim that

they are anti-Brotherhood and that the disputes with the UAE are tactical, not ideological.”

“Just because the Saudis are not Shiite does not mean they're Zionists. No one should get too carried away. And I'm sure there are elements of the Saudi government that are not nearly anti-[Muslim] Brotherhood as much as they should be,” Sherman said. “That being said, I see a foreign minister who is not Qatar or Turkey.”

“If you're worried about Israel, you should never put any of the countries we're talking about here in the 'don't worry about it' category — you've got to worry,” he continued. “But the foreign minister went

out of his way to say that when it comes to the Brotherhood or Iran, that there's less reason to worry about Saudi Arabia."

He said that he expects Saudi Arabia and the UAE to come to an agreement on the anti-Houthi campaign to deconflict the situation — likely one which would see the UAE take a decreased role in Yemen.

Sherman also said he did not see evidence that Saudi Arabia has significantly accelerated or expanded its relationship with Qatar — though he also noted that Saudi-Qatari tensions have gradually eased over the past few years and particularly since the Arab League blockade of Qatar. Saudi Arabia signed a major deal earlier this month to link Riyadh and Doha with a high-speed rail line.

Even so, Sherman said he has other pre-existing concerns about Saudi Arabia, such as its pursuit of a nuclear program and bid to purchase F-35 fighter jets, neither of which was discussed at Wednesday's meeting.

Rep. Brian Mast (R-FL), the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, also met with Prince Faisal. He said it was "great" to see the foreign minister and that the group had discussed various issues including Yemen, Sudan and Gaza.

**"Saudi Arabia and UAE are very close, right? I mean, that's an understatement," Rep. Brian Mast (R-FL), the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, told JI. "What I'm saying — everybody can have disagreements, spats, misunderstandings about different things, and that relationship is no different, but those two are two very, very close allies."**

"The U.S.-Saudi relationship remains a pillar of U.S. policy in the region," Mast said in a statement. "I look forward to continuing to build upon our decades-old alliance to help resolve some of the region's most pressing and complex challenges."

He dismissed concerns about a potential Saudi repositioning or clash with the UAE.

"Saudi Arabia and UAE are very close, right? I mean, that's an understatement," Mast told JI in a brief interview. "What I'm saying — everybody can have disagreements, spats, misunderstandings

about different things, and that relationship is no different, but those two are two very, very close allies."

A congressional source deeply involved in Middle East issues argued that ties between the Sudanese Armed Forces — the faction Saudi Arabia is backing in Sudan — and the Muslim Brotherhood have been overstated and that the Saudi decision to back the SAF is a tactical one rather than an ideological signal of alignment with the Brotherhood. The source said that the Saudis have indicated that they are working to push the Brotherhood elements out of the SAF faction.

And, the source emphasized, both sides in Sudan have committed significant atrocities, further noting that the Trump administration sanctioned the Rapid Support Forces — which successive U.S. governments have found is committing genocide. The source said that Saudi Arabian officials have been clear they do not want the U.S. to sanction the UAE over its alleged support for the RSF, as some in Abu Dhabi heard after Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit.

Regarding the Saudi strike in Yemen, the source said that Saudi Arabia was concerned about anti-Saudi forces approaching its territory and that the shipment the UAE convoy was transporting was being provided to those forces.

Sen. Markwayne Mullin (R-OK) said that there "a lot of concerns" about a Saudi dispute with the UAE in Yemen but that he is not "worried about [the Saudis] repositioning to an extreme point."

"I don't think we see that yet. There's still a lot of conversations going on," Mullin said. "I think that was just one of those regional things that sometimes we have a lack of understanding — or maybe understand it, but don't understand it."

Another lawmaker who has had conversations with individuals in the region said on condition of anonymity that — despite recent headlines — they did not believe that Saudi Arabia was making a fundamental pivot in its posture away from moderation or toward a more extremist Islamist stance.

The lawmaker added that the tensions between the two U.S. partners have been "surprising" but also noted there is a long

and complex history between the two countries.

Addressing the Saudi-Emirati tensions, Sen. Pete Ricketts (R-NE), the No. 2 Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, acknowledged that the two countries had conveyed "different interests," but did not appear concerned that their differences would alter the Saudis' view of Iran as the top threat in the region.

**"The UAE seems like they're trying to diversify their sources of support in the region, and that's a point of some disagreement between the Saudi leadership and UAE leadership," Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) told JI.**

"I have no insight into what's going on there, but clearly they've got different interests," Ricketts told JI. "Saudi Arabia's long-term interest is in a peaceful Middle East where they have allies to offset Iran. Saudi Arabia knows that in the region their worst enemy is Iran, and so they're going to want allies to push back."

Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX), who sits on the Senate Intelligence Committee as well as on Foreign Relations, said his primary concern was the UAE's deepening ties with Russia.

"I mean, the UAE seems like they're trying to diversify their sources of support in the region, and that's a point of some disagreement between the Saudi leadership and UAE leadership," Cornyn told JI.

"What worries me a little bit is UAE talking about allowing the Russians to build a military base there," he continued. "They seem to be less convinced that they can rely on support from the United States and so they are looking for other friends. That concerns me."

Sen. John Kennedy (R-LA) attributed the fissures to the situation in Sudan and instability in Yemen that neither country could independently solve, but said he had been informed that the Saudis and Emiratis had addressed their differences.

"Well, Yemen is a mess," Kennedy said. "The UAE and the Saudis have been allies. Now, they recently got crossways, but I understand they got it worked out. I don't know what else to say. I mean, Yemen is just, ... it's not a stable country."

Pressed on the Gulf states having

“worked out” their issues, the Louisiana senator responded, “Well, I think that got a lot of it worked out. The Saudis and UAE ... they’re crossways in Sudan. They’re not always joined at the hip, so I wasn’t particularly shocked about it, but my understanding is they got it worked out.”

Sen. Mark Warner (D-VA), the ranking member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said he hadn’t been following all of the developments with Saudi Arabia’s regional posture but had been tracking the conflict in Sudan, where Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been backing opposing sides in the civil war. Warner emphasized that

“neither one of them are the good guys,” referring to the UAE-aligned RSF and Saudi-aligned SAF.

“It does bother me, not just where [the Saudis] may be moving, but also just ... in terms of bombing [in] Yemen,” Warner added, referring to the Saudi strike.

Warner, who led Intelligence Committee members on a visit to Saudi Arabia to meet with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2024, said that the Saudis were, at the time, “anxious to get normalization with Israel,” but the Gaza war interrupted that progress.

And Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-

CT) said the “instability” in the region — including the Saudi-UAE tensions — demonstrates the need for strong congressional oversight of “any agreement that’s reached with any of our potential partners there.

President Donald Trump recently announced a series of deals with Saudi Arabia, including selling the kingdom F-35 fighter jets and naming Riyadh a major non-NATO ally, without making public strides toward Saudi-Israeli normalization.

“And very bluntly, it reemphasizes that our one truly reliable ally in the Middle East is Israel,” Blumenthal continued. ♦

JANUARY 8, 2026

## Detroit’s Downtown Synagogue aims to build bridges with programming arm named for late Samantha Woll

*After her tragic stabbing, the synagogue that the young Jewish leader helped to revitalize is working to permanently honor her and her legacy*

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By Jay Deitcher

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

According to a 2018 Jewish Federation of Detroit study, over 70,000 Jews live in the metropolitan area, most within suburbs like Southfield and West Bloomfield beyond the city, having abandoned Detroit’s innercity in the 1950s and ‘60s. The exodus mirrored similar migration patterns in cities across the U.S., but over the past two decades, there’s been a revival, with young Jews streaming back into the revitalized city.

The late Samantha Woll was one such person, breathing life into Jewish landmarks, including the historic Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue, where she served as president.

“Sam was a Jewish Detroiter,” Rachel Rudman, executive director of the Downtown Synagogue, the last remaining synagogue in the heart of the city, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. “She lived in Detroit.

She showed up as a Jewish person in all the places where she showed up, and she showed up as a Detroiter in all the places where she showed up as a Jew.”

Before Woll was fatally stabbed outside her home in October 2023, she helped lead a capital campaign for the congregation, which raised \$7.5 million to revitalize the synagogue’s building, a four-story, triangle-shaped landmark with Skittle-colored windows that the congregation has occupied since the ‘60s.

At the congregation’s 2024 block party, the synagogue renamed the rehabbed building the Samantha Woll Center for Jewish Detroit, but the makeover was not simply physical — in November, the over-100-year-old nondenominational congregation announced that it is reimagining its programming arm as “The Sam” in Woll’s honor.

The Sam will offer programs exploring Jewish identity as well as cultivate nuanced

conversations around politics, culture, art, race, security and Israel. The only rule for participation is that participants must be respectful and tolerant of competing views.

Selected in 2017 by The Detroit Jewish News as one of its “36 under 36” and later called one of Detroit’s “great young leaders” by Mayor Mike Duggan, Woll was known for building bridges across divides, including through her involvement in state and local politics and through the Muslim-Jewish Forum of Detroit, a grassroots organization she founded to foster understanding between young Jews and Muslims.

Woll “was able to have conversations with people that were different than her or that believed things differently than she believed in ways that were kind and considerate and nuanced,” Rudman said. “She was able to show up truly as who she was in these types of conversations, and [others] were able to show up [as who] they were. People that were different from each

other were able to have dialog in a way that's so often missed right now."

The Sam came about as part of the congregation's nine-month strategic planning process, which was overseen by ABW Partners, an organizational development firm. The board approved the plan in October, and a job listing for a director was posted in late November.

"The community is crying out for a place where Jewish identity can be deeply explored, particularly in Detroit," Andy Doctoroff, the Downtown Synagogue's incoming board president and co-chair of the strategic visioning task force, told eJP.

Along with her service to the Downtown Synagogue, Woll served as a board member of Jewish Community Relations Council/AJC Detroit, a member of AJC's Global ACCESS Steering Committee and as co-chair of AJC's ACCESS Detroit Young Leadership Program.

Woll was the consummate volunteer, Ariana Silverman, the Downtown Synagogue's rabbi, told eJP. "She was just

one of those leaders in the congregation that everybody knew they could turn to... She was very Jewishly knowledgeable, but also very passionate about making Jewish literacy accessible for others and so having educational events and cultural events that promote a knowledge of different Jewish literacies and interests is going to be very beautiful in her memory."

Just like Woll sought to cultivate relationships with other communities, The Sam will serve as a meeting place, holding panels and programming that cross divides.

"We're living in a world where there's so much divisiveness," Silverman said. "For Sam, it was so important for people to come together across lines of difference. Part of the work of The Sam is going to be trying to build those bridges across lines of difference, whether it's race or faith or class in the city of Detroit. We are stronger when we come together. And she was deeply passionate about that work, and The Sam will be passionate about that work too."

The building renovation was funded by

congregants, as well as the Metro Jewish community overall, with major donors including the William Davidson Foundation, The Jewish Fund, the D. Dan and Betty Kahn Foundation, the Gilbert Family Foundation, the Max M. and Marjorie S. Fisher Foundation and the Woll-Yellin Family Foundation, Woll's family foundation. The Sam is expected to be funded similarly.

Woll's family has been deeply involved in the planning of The Sam. They recently financed a parking subsidy program to make the synagogue more accessible.

Creating a home for Jews who don't fit neatly into boxes, "not just for religion, but for other community activities," and welcoming people of all backgrounds to connect with them is a fitting tribute for Woll, her sister, Monica Woll Rosen, told eJP.

"It's meeting a need that currently doesn't exist in Detroit," she said. "Especially in light of today's world, it can do a lot of good in the community and society at large, and I think it's a really nice way to honor my sister's legacy." ♦

JANUARY 7, 2026

## New York Jewish leaders hope Menin will serve as check against Mamdani

*Julie Menin was elected the first Jewish speaker of the New York City Council on Wednesday*

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By Matthew Kassel

**J**ulie Menin's election on Wednesday as speaker of the New York City Council was a reassuring sign to Jewish leaders who have long seen the 58-year-old centrist Democrat as a key ally and believe that she will act as a check on Mayor Zohran Mamdani with regard to issues involving Israel and antisemitism.

In a unanimous vote, Menin, a pro-Israel lawmaker and veteran city official who lives on the Upper East Side, became the council's first Jewish speaker, pledging in her victory speech to focus on "dissolving division" and

to "calm tensions" as she prepares to work with a mayor whose hostile views on Israel have long been a defining characteristic of his political ascendance.

"We live in a day with the first Muslim mayor of New York City and now the first Jewish speaker of the council serving at the same time," Menin said on Wednesday.

Despite the positive tone, Menin, who as speaker now holds the second-most powerful elected role in city government, is still facing the looming prospect of conflict with Mamdani over their differing stances

on Israel, which has already animated their nascent relationship.

In her speech, Menin alluded to some tensions that could stoke divisions, insisting that "we must never jeopardize a New Yorker's right to worship."

"Because we cannot let what happened outside Park East Synagogue ever happen again, at any house of worship," Menin said, referring to a protest outside a Manhattan synagogue in November that targeted an event about immigration to Israel and featured chants including "death to the IDF"



and “globalize the intifada,” a slogan that Mamdani has refused to condemn.

Mamdani had faced intense criticism after he had admonished the synagogue for promoting what he called “activities in violation of international law,” a statement he later revised.

More recently, after Mamdani had repealed a pair of executive orders tied to Israel and antisemitism on his first day in office last week, Menin said in an interview with *The New York Post* that she called the mayor to voice her concerns, noting there will “obviously be continued conversation around this.”

Menin added in a separate interview with *The New York Times* published on Wednesday that she had a “productive conversation” with Mamdani regarding his decision to rescind an executive order issued by former Mayor Eric Adams that adopted a working definition of antisemitism used by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, which labels some criticism of Israel as antisemitic.

While Mamdani indicated during the election that he would seek to invalidate the order, the move triggered widespread backlash from Jewish leaders who said it raised questions over his commitment to effectively fighting antisemitism.

Menin, for her part, telegraphed a more diplomatic position to the *Times*, even as she had said she was “extremely concerned” by the repeals. “It’s one tool that can be utilized,” she said of the definition. “It’s obviously not the only tool.”

Her assessment underscores what Jewish leaders close to Menin characterized as an even-keeled and largely unflappable approach to governance, which could now be tested on issues she has described as intensely personal.

Menin, a daughter and granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, has long warned of rising antisemitism in New York and has advocated for increased funding to help promote Holocaust education. Menin visited Israel during a solidarity trip after the Hamas terror attacks of Oct. 7, 2023 — after which she introduced a program to send eighth graders to the Museum of Jewish Heritage to raise awareness about the global history of antisemitism.

Chris Coffey, a Democratic strategist

who has served as an informal advisor to Menin, said she is “results-oriented and not focused on labels,” while predicting “she will work with the mayor when she can.”

“There may be times when they don’t agree and they will work through it,” he told *Jewish Insider* earlier this week, saying Menin is “more interested in results than drama.”

Yeruchim Silber, director of New York government relations at Agudath Israel of America, an Orthodox advocacy group, said that Menin “has a long history of working with the Jewish community,” calling her “an important part of the [former New York Mayor Bill] de Blasio administration,” when she led efforts to promote participation in the 2020 census.

He told JI he was “confident she will be able to work collaboratively with” Mamdani’s administration “on all issues important to the community.”

Still, other related issues could emerge as a more challenging test, as Jewish leaders speculate about what actions Mamdani will take next. One point of major tension stems from the partnership between Cornell University and Israel’s Technion, which the mayor’s team had indicated during the election that he would reassess.

Menin, a staunch opponent of Israel boycotts, has praised the joint Cornell Tech campus on Roosevelt Island, which sits in her district, as a crucial hub for local tech and business innovation. “That is an area, of course, of disagreement,” Menin said last month regarding Mamdani’s skepticism of the partnership.

A spokesperson for Menin did not respond to a request for comment from JI on her differences with the mayor.

Menin and Mamdani have in recent weeks largely struck a collaborative tone, appearing at their first joint press conference on Monday to sign executive orders to counter deceptive business practices such as junk fees. Menin has emphasized a shared focus on affordability goals including universal daycare, a key priority of Mamdani’s fledgling administration.

But their courteous public relationship belies other underlying tensions. For his part, Mamdani — who never formally voiced a preference in the contest for council speaker — had privately sought to thwart

Menin’s effort as she consolidated backing from a range of members and locked up a supermajority several weeks before the Jan. 1 inauguration. Last month, in a notable snub, Mamdani also did not include Menin in a group of more than 100 elected officials he picked to advise his transition.

Menin, meanwhile, declined to endorse Mamdani, and during the primary chose not to join a summer meeting he had arranged with local Jewish elected officials to address their concerns about his critical views on Israel.

Now that they are working together, some Jewish allies of Menin said they expect that she will put her differences with Mamdani aside, unless provoked to take action with regard to key issues on which she is not aligned with the mayor.

One Jewish leader close to Menin, who asked to remain anonymous to speak candidly, said the new speaker “will be willing to partner with” Mamdani’s administration “to improve the city,” but suggested that it is in the mayor’s “hands to stop doing actions that isolate and antagonize the Jewish community.”

“She is definitely of a mindset of wanting to work together but doing what he did on inauguration day was definitely viewed as a first punch,” the Jewish leader told JI, referring to the executive orders that Mamdani revoked.

Jake Dilemani, a Democratic consultant who served as an informal advisor to Menin in her 2021 Council bid, said that the speaker “is focused on governance and delivering results, and has a strong track record on affordability and consumer protection issues.”

“So, the expectation is this will be a cornerstone of her speakership and that she will work with Mayor Mamdani to put points on the board,” he told JI. “She equally has a strong record on Jewish issues and fighting antisemitism, and it is something that is very personal for her. I fully expect that she will work productively with the mayor on many issues, but will stand up to the administration should she deem it necessary.” ♦

# Why Israel recognized Somaliland — and what the rest of the world might do next

*After Israel announced it would recognize the secessionist region, the big question remains whether the United States will follow suit*

By Gabby Deutch

When Israel announced the day after Christmas that it would formally recognize Somaliland, making it the first country in the world to announce formal diplomatic relations with the secessionist region in the Horn of Africa, even some of Washington's foremost foreign policy experts were sheepishly asking the same question: What, exactly, is Somaliland?

There was no single event that led to Israel's choice to recognize the sovereignty of Somaliland, which announced its independence from Somalia in 1991. The territory has functioned independently for 35 years; nothing in its governance changed last year.

What changed was Israel — and its geopolitical calculus regarding regional security threats.

"The Houthis didn't used to fire missiles at Israel. That's new, and Israel's now trying to respond to a new situation," said David Makovsky, the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "I have no doubt that this was driven by how to try to neutralize a threat from the Houthis that Israel takes very seriously."

Somaliland sits just across the Gulf of Aden from Yemen, from which the Iran-backed Houthis have fired drones and ballistic missiles at Israel following the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks in 2023. Allying with Somaliland could allow Israel to target the Yemeni militia from much closer range. Israel has also reportedly approached Somaliland about resettling Palestinians from Gaza there, although officials in the country have denied that such conversations took place.

Somaliland also sits in a strategic location south of Djibouti and to the east of Ethiopia, and its coastland is close to where the Indian Ocean and Red Sea meet, making it a prime shipping location.

"No one can ignore the strategic location

of Somaliland," Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, Danny Danon, told *The Wall Street Journal*. "The straits are a strategic point."

Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar visited Hargeisa, Somaliland's capital, on Tuesday to meet with President Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi. It was the first visit by a foreign minister to Somaliland in its more than three decades of existence as a self-governing entity.

The key question is whether Jerusalem's recognition of Somaliland will prompt similar moves by other nations. Somalia, with which Israel does not have diplomatic relations, has slammed the move. The African Union on Tuesday called for Israel to walk back its recognition, saying the move "represents an unacceptable interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign Member State of the United Nations."

But even as Israel faces diplomatic pushback even from allied African nations, it has created an opening for Somaliland to press its case internationally.

The region was a separate entity from Somalia beginning in the 19th century, when it was controlled by the British — in contrast to present-day Somalia, which was previously ruled by Italy. Today Somaliland is home to 6 million people, and it has held democratic elections throughout the past two decades.

Washington has not recognized Somaliland, and a State Department spokesperson told *Jewish Insider* on Tuesday that no such announcement is forthcoming.

"The United States continues to recognize the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Somalia, which includes the territory of Somaliland," the spokesperson said.

But at an emergency United Nations

Security Council hearing last week, Tammy Bruce, the U.S. deputy representative to the U.N., defended Israel's right to conduct diplomacy, and she called out the body's "persistent double standards" in treating the recognition of Somaliland as different from states that have unilaterally recognized a Palestinian state.

**"The Americans are engaging with the country. How quickly they move to recognize Somaliland, I don't know," said Max Webb, a Horn of Africa expert who works at Israel Policy Forum. "Somaliland has been a fixture of Republican politics."**

"Israel has the same right to conduct diplomatic relations as any other sovereign state," said Bruce. "Earlier this year, several countries including members of this council made the unilateral decision to recognize a non-existent Palestinian state, and yet no emergency meeting was called to express this council's outrage."

Even though Washington does not recognize Somaliland, the region has a small diplomatic mission in the United States. In December, the top U.S. military official overseeing the Africa Command visited Somaliland and met with Abdullahi, its president.

"The Americans are engaging with the country. How quickly they move to recognize Somaliland, I don't know," said Max Webb, a Horn of Africa expert who works at Israel Policy Forum. "Somaliland has been a fixture of Republican politics."

The conservative Heritage Foundation first called for U.S. recognition of Somaliland in 2021. Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) threw his support behind recognition last August, and he said in a post on X on Monday that Somaliland recognition "aligns with

America's security interests." President Donald Trump told *The New York Post* in December that he wasn't yet ready to recognize Somaliland but that he will "study" the issue. "Does anyone know what Somaliland is, really?" Trump said.

Taiwan, which is not a United Nations member state, has a representative office in Somaliland, but it has not formally recognized Somaliland as an independent state. A handful of regional powerhouses, including Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates, also have strong economic relationships with Somaliland. They have yet to establish full diplomatic ties, although Somaliland and Ethiopia — the second most populous nation in Africa — signed a major memorandum of understanding in 2024. There are larger geopolitical factors at play: Egypt is closely aligned with Somalia, while Egypt and Ethiopia have long been at odds

over an Ethiopian hydroelectric project on the Nile River. Turkey and Qatar, both of which are close to Mogadishu, condemned Israel's actions.

Somalia is a key counterterrorism partner for the U.S., particularly as the Islamist group al-Shabab has grown and become more deadly alongside a Somali affiliate of ISIS. Some worry that U.S. recognition of Somaliland could hamper that coordination.

**"Somaliland is on the map," said Michael Rubin, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. "People who had never heard of Somaliland a week ago are suddenly reading up on its history and understanding its arguments."**

"I'm sure there are other countries as well beyond the U.S. that worry if they

recognize Somaliland, then Somalia will have a full meltdown and will cut off counterterrorism cooperation, for instance, and then al-Shabab will make even further gains," said Joshua Meservey, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute who has called for U.S. recognition of Somaliland. "Somalia's dysfunction almost protects it, in a way, from Somaliland gaining wider recognition."

Over the past 10 days, no other states have followed Israel's lead. But a diplomatic crisis has not emerged, at least not yet — and now, Somaliland is part of the global conversation in a serious way for the first time since it declared independence.

"Somaliland is on the map," said Michael Rubin, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. "People who had never heard of Somaliland a week ago are suddenly reading up on its history and understanding its arguments." ♦

JANUARY 7, 2026

## JCC Association restructures to increase offerings, collaboration and staff

*The umbrella organization will be based around three centers: the Center for Jewish Peoplehood, Center for Talent Development and the Center for Innovation and Impact*

By Jay Deitcher

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

Having served Jewish communities across the United States, Rabbi Daniel Septimus knows a great many Jewish people from all walks of life. Jewish people from every sect, with roots embedded throughout the globe. Jewish people who speak with a drawl, who bring in Shabbat over rice and beans and who have wicked good Purim costumes.

"Regardless of what background you come from Jewishly, regardless if you have come to Judaism later in life as someone who's converted, you're all a part of this people that's connected," Septimus told

eJewishPhilanthropy. "Judaism is what grounds us; the Torah is what grounds us, the traditions, the cultures, but at the end of the day, we're all part of the people, and we're all bound to each other. And the JCC is that place, that square, where people can come together to talk through these things."

At the end of November, the JCC Association of North America announced that Septimus will serve as the organization's first executive director of the Center for Jewish Peoplehood, beginning July 1, as part of a complete restructuring that Barak Hermann, the JCC Association's president and CEO, hopes will increase staff by 40%.

Hermann joined the JCC Association

in July — after over three decades holding leadership roles in the JCC movement, most recently as CEO of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Baltimore — with the goal of shaking up the organization, which was founded more than a century ago.

The restructuring divides the organization into three "Centers of Excellence": the Center for Talent Development, the Center for Jewish Peoplehood and the Center for Innovation and Impact.

"Almost everybody's getting new job descriptions in a very dynamic, exciting way," Hermann told eJP.

Working out of Austin, Texas, Septimus

will travel to JCCs across the country, managing a multimillion-dollar budget and overseeing the JCC Maccabi Games, the Center for Israel Engagement, the Mandel Center for Jewish Education, JCC Camps of North America and JWB Jewish Chaplains Council, which advocates for Jewish military personnel.

Every JCC “has its own identity, but there are a lot of things that are very similar,” Septimus said, “so our goal is to better connect JCCs and other entities that want to connect to each other that have similar needs, similar challenges.”

For instance, if a JCC sets a goal of increasing Israel conversations under its roof, its leadership would talk with Septimus about how to do so, and he’d share what other JCCs are doing to accomplish that task, with data to back everything up. Possibly, the JCC would decide to run its own Z3 (Zionism 3.0) Conference, mirroring the annual event held at the Oshman Family Jewish Community Center in Palo Alto, Calif., and Septimus would ensure that it has the guidance and tools to do so.

Septimus plans to specifically focus on camps affiliated with JCCs, planning to launch a listening campaign to ensure each camp is getting the resources it needs to thrive, providing consultants to target each camp’s specific needs and leveraging grants from the Foundation for Jewish Camp.

“We haven’t had someone who is out there just supporting the camps,” Septimus said. “The JCC movement has more residential camps than any other movement in North American life: 25 overnight camps. That’s a huge network, and I don’t think we’ve treated it as a network and supported these camps in the way that we could.”

With JCCs serving over 1.5 million people weekly — a third non-Jewish — with many of the Jewish patrons not belonging to synagogues, JCCs are “a very low barrier

way of engaging in Jewish life,” a gateway to the larger community, especially as the post-Oct. 7 “Surge” has led many Jews to reconnect, Septimus said. “The JCCs have a very important role to play in harnessing that momentum.”

Septimus grew up in a Houston Reform household and credits the pluralistic Jewish youth movement BBYO with formulating who he is today. “In BBYO, I was able to just be with people from different perspectives, trying to inspire people to feel great about their Jewish identity and their Jewish connection, and this is what I think this center and what my role is to do, to bring people [and] get them excited from all walks of life,” he said.

He is adept at corralling people from across the Jewish spectrum having served for nearly a decade as CEO at the umbrella group Shalom Austin, which includes a Jewish federation, Jewish Community Center, Jewish Family Services and Jewish foundation. Before his time at Shalom Austin, he studied in Israel, New Orleans and at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati before serving as student rabbi for South Dakota’s Synagogue of the Hills, associate rabbi and director of congregation learning at Seattle’s Temple De Hirsch Sinai and executive director of Texas Hillel.

The Center for Jewish Peoplehood will work in partnership with the Center for Talent Development and the Center for Innovation and Impact to ensure initiatives are fueled in data and with top professionals and lay leaders.

Hermann describes the Center for Innovation and Impact as “the Apple wing” of the organization, focusing on research, development and measuring program effectiveness.

“We always did research, but not in the robust, comprehensive way that I’m

planning,” Hermann said. “It’ll be not just surveying and creating measurement tools to articulate the effectiveness of the work, but [using] that data [to help] JCCs to do their business better [and] potentially raise more philanthropy in their community.”

The Center for Innovation of Impact will study initiatives in the larger Jewish world targeting concerns and trends in Jewish life. It will also study ways JCCs can generate and conserve revenue at a time when the cost of overhead is skyrocketing.

The Center for Talent Development will include pipeline development programs, initiatives supporting lay leaders and programs to recruit and develop JCC executives. Additionally, the JCC Association is launching a merkaz, the Hebrew word for “center,” that will offer “a plethora of new [physical and virtual] training opportunities, everything from management skills, advancing your ability to lead Jewishly. It could be stuff on AI,” Hermann said.

The association is also launching JCC Direct to provide executives and their teams with business support in core areas, including camping, early childhood, membership, arts and culture.

While the JCC Association has always had a team focused on supporting and training talent, Hermann expects this new center will quadruple the staff focused on talent and the development opportunities the organization offers.

The restructuring will allow the JCC Association to best support individual JCCs so it can be there for the Jewish people, Septimus said. “What we’re going to be doing is working together to try to make sure that we have the right resources in the field to make sure that these people can do the work that they want to do.” ♦



# Bruce Blakeman outlines his approach to antisemitism if elected NY governor

*Asked about right-wing antisemitism, Blakeman said that Tucker Carlson 'is a big blowhard who has an issue with Jewish people'*

By Marc Rod

Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman suddenly emerged as the presumptive Republican nominee for governor of New York in December, with Rep. Elise Stefanik's (R-NY) unexpected exit from the race against Gov. Kathy Hochul.

Now, with the formal endorsement of President Donald Trump, Blakeman is preparing for an uphill battle in a reliably Democratic state.

Blakeman, 70, is Jewish and said he represents the greatest number of constituents of any Jewish Republican elected official — more than 1.3 million. He vowed to protect the Jewish community statewide against antisemitism, and pledged that under his leadership, the state would step in if New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani fails to do so.

Blakeman said that he has worked with the Nassau County police to deal with disruptive anti-Israel protests, setting firm rules for demonstrators, with prompt arrests if they stepped outside of those boundaries.

**"If they got off the sidewalk, they would be given one chance to get back on it or they'd be arrested," Blakeman said. "We didn't take any nonsense. We didn't allow them to do the things that they got away with in New York City. And that's the same way I would approach it as governor."**

"Nick Fuentes is, in my opinion, a nut, but a dangerous one, and he has no place in the Republican Party," Blakeman said. "Tucker Carlson is a big blowhard who has an issue with Jewish people, and it probably emanates from his chameleon-like personality. ... He's very unprincipled and I think he has biases that probably emanated from his youth."

Blakeman said that if Mamdani fails

to enforce the law, he would dispatch state police and national guard to do so. "We will not let any community be lawless, and I will not tolerate any acts of bigotry, antisemitism or racism in a state where I'm the governor."

Asked about voices like Tucker Carlson and neo-Nazi influencer Nick Fuentes who are working to mainstream antisemitic ideas in the Republican Party, Blakeman did not mince words in his condemnation.

"Nick Fuentes is, in my opinion, a nut, but a dangerous one, and he has no place in the Republican Party," Blakeman said. "Tucker Carlson is a big blowhard who has an issue with Jewish people, and it probably emanates from his chameleon-like personality. ... He's very unprincipled and I think he has biases that probably emanated from his youth."

At the same time, Blakeman argued that he sees most antisemitism in the United States coming from the left, pointing to the large-scale turn against Israel in the Democratic Party.

"We have a couple of nuts in our party, but certainly [they are the] vast minority, and in the Democratic Party, it seems to me that they have completely abandoned Israel and that they are a hotbed for antisemitic activities," Blakeman said.

He predicted those trends will help his campaign capture a significant number of Jewish Democratic voters who "realize that the Democratic Party has become an extreme party that's hostile to Israel and hostile to Jewish people."

He said he feels it's important for the Republican Party to have "a strong Jewish presence" and that he takes his responsibility in that role seriously, saying he wants to be a "role model" for other Jewish people to get involved in GOP politics.

**"I am a strong supporter of Israel," Blakeman said. "I am a Zionist and a proud Zionist."**

"It's something that I don't take lightly as being a leader and someone who is a Jew and in the Republican Party," Blakeman said.

Blakeman said he's established a strong record as an ally and supporter of Israel in Nassau County, building business ties to Israel, implementing anti-Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions legislation and signing friendship agreements with what he called Judea and Samaria — the biblical term preferred by the Israeli government for the West Bank — and the Shomron Regional Council, a council of Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

"I am a strong supporter of Israel," Blakeman said. "I am a Zionist and a proud Zionist."

He said he's currently under contract to buy an apartment in Beit Shemesh, as an investment.

Asked about the role his Jewish faith has played in his time in office and public life, the Nassau County executive responded, "Everything that I do emanates from the strength that's given to me by *Hashem*, by God. So I am very mindful that it's only with God's blessings that I have the strength to do what I'm doing."

"I ask for God's blessings each and every day, and I pray every day, and I feel that having that spiritual connection with God is a very important part of my life," he continued.

Blakeman said his campaign will focus on improving public safety, lowering prices for businesses and residents, making the state government more responsive and stopping the population flight from the

state, issues he said are being driven by incumbent Gov. Kathy Hochul, a Democrat.

He framed Nassau County, under his leadership, as a counterpoint to those trends, pointing to the county's low taxes and strong financial position. "If we can do that on the state level, I'm sure people will be happy. They'll want to do business here. They want to live here, and they will flourish and prosper."

"I want to make people happy. I want them to be proud of New York. I want them

to want to raise their children and their grandchildren," Blakeman said.

He said that his past victories in a Democratic-leaning county provide a model for winning statewide in deep-blue New York, arguing that he's been able to reach populations that haven't traditionally voted Republican, including Hispanic, Latino, Asian American, women and African American voters.

Asked about Mamdani's victory in New York City, Blakeman said that Mamdani's

focus on affordability "struck a note with a lot of voters," but New York City Republicans "didn't have an adequate message with respect to that issue — and I do."

Blakeman said he wants to create jobs and make the state more prosperous, rather than providing "a free bus ride or a handout," spurring economic development and job creation in collaboration with the business community and unions. ♦

JANUARY 6, 2026

## The judge overseeing the Maduro trial blazed a trail for Jewish lawyers

*Judge Alvin Hellerstein became a law clerk because firms would not hire an Orthodox lawyer; now, he cites Torah from the bench*

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By Gabby Deutch

Judge Alvin Hellerstein is 92 years old, and with 27 years on the federal bench in Manhattan, he has presided over some of the most prominent trials in recent memory — including thousands of lawsuits brought in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, a suit against disgraced Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein and, now, the criminal case against deposed Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

It's a remarkable final chapter in a legal career that was once nearly derailed by antisemitism. Hellerstein has described his judicial style as being influenced by Judge Edmund Palmieri, for whom Hellerstein served as a law clerk in the 1950s. (Ruth Bader Ginsburg, later a Supreme Court justice, clerked for Palmieri a few years later.) But that chapter almost didn't happen. Hellerstein wanted to work at a law firm, but he ended up applying to clerkships because he said the non-Jewish law firms in New York would not hire him.

"As a Jewish boy coming to interview at law firms, you met up with very strong discrimination, some of it overt, most of it implied," Hellerstein said in an interview in 2020 on the podcast "Behind the Bima." He

ended up working at a Jewish firm — one of the first Orthodox lawyers to be employed at any New York City firm.

"I was pleased to say that after me, that there were others, and some credit me with having broken the precedent," Hellerstein said. "When I became a judge, it didn't make any difference if I was Orthodox or not. It made no difference if I was religious or not. My capabilities as a lawyer were measured, as well as my character and other characteristics, but there was no discrimination."

Now, the eyes of not just the legal profession but the world will be upon Hellerstein as he oversees the federal criminal case against Maduro following the brazen U.S. capture of the controversial Venezuelan leader. Maduro pleaded not guilty on Monday in his first court appearance in New York, where he faces narco-terrorism and weapons charges.

Hellerstein was nominated to serve as a federal district judge in the Southern District of New York by President Bill Clinton in 1998. In 2011, he assumed senior status, which means he hears fewer cases than he once did. (President Barack Obama

nominated Jesse Furman, also an observant Jew, to fill Hellerstein's seat on the bench.)

In his chambers, Hellerstein displays a sign bearing a Hebrew phrase from the book of Deuteronomy: "*Tzedek tzedek tirdof*," it reads. "Justice, justice, you shall pursue."

Hellerstein has spoken often about a case he presided over nearly two decades ago, in which a Mexican immigrant truck driver faced drug charges related to narcotics planted in his truck by a different driver. Hellerstein helped the defendant obtain legal counsel, and the case was ultimately dismissed by federal prosecutors — saving the defendant from prison and deportation. When the truck driver appeared in front of Hellerstein, thanking him and crying, Hellerstein invoked that passage from the Torah.

"I told him about the sign I had in my office, *tzedek tzedek tirdof*," Hellerstein said in the 2020 interview. "I told him that there are many reasons that are given for the repetition, but the one I favor is that we don't know where justice is. We have to pursue it. We have to look for it. And when an opportunity is given to have justice in the courtroom, justice in the eyes of the defense

counsel, justice in the eyes of the prosecutor, justice in the eyes of the judge and the public, we have to thank him [the defendant] for giving us this opportunity.”

Hellerstein has been active in Jewish communal life for decades. Before he was appointed to the federal bench, Hellerstein served as president of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York. He has also been a philanthropic supporter of The Jewish Center, an Orthodox synagogue on the Upper West Side, and AMIT, a network of schools in Israel. According to a 2016 *New York Times* article, Hellerstein played tennis with three rabbis weekly for more than 45 years.

But Hellerstein has long said that being

Jewish does not influence the decisions he reaches as a judge.

“I would not want it to be said that I ruled in a certain way because I am an Orthodox Jew, and I would not want to feel that my Jewish upbringing or values cause me to rule in one way and not another,” Hellerstein wrote in a 2013 article in the *Touro Law Review*. “My rulings, over thirteen years of judging, are my record. They reflect all that influenced me ... indeed, all my life experiences, and, certainly, my Jewish education and my Jewish values. But, above all these influences, there is one category that stands pre-eminent — the Constitution, statutes, and cases that I swore as a judge to follow and uphold.”

In the 2020 interview, recorded during the High Holy Days, Hellerstein was asked by Rabbi Philip Moskowitz of Boca Raton Synagogue what advice he, as a judge, would share ahead of Yom Kippur, the ultimate judgment day.

“You’re in a much better place than I am to make those suggestions,” he quipped to the rabbi. “I do feel that I have to account for what I do. Part of my accountability is to the Court of Appeals, where I can be reversed, and I often am. Another is my account to the individuals involved directly in the process. And third, I have to account to God. My purpose in life is to be as good a judge as I can be, and I have to ask for strength and wisdom in performing that job.” ♦



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