

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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JANUARY 4, 2022

Are Israel and Iran competing on the same side in Ethiopia?

Iran's encroachment in the East African country on the side of the government puts the Jewish state in a delicate position

By Ruth Marks

When reports surfaced a few months ago of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed deploying combat drones in his government's fight against local militant groups, Israel was paying close attention. Sharing the concerns of other nations, including the United States, that the fighting could destabilize Africa's second most populous nation, Israelis were also troubled by which countries were among those supplying the East African nation with the latest armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

Diplomats and analysts monitoring the 13-month-long civil war in Ethiopia, a fight between government forces and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a regional force that once controlled the federal government, have determined that these arms came from three main sources: Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and, particularly concerning for Israel, Iran.

Iran's influence on the African continent is not new. The Islamic Republic is known for spreading its extremist ideology, whether via terror proxies or financing mosques and

cultural centers, in certain African states. But its appearance in a new conflict, in a country with which Israel has particularly warm relations – including providing arms and military assistance in the past – as well as a place where an already vulnerable Jewish community resides, has placed Israel in a sensitive and curious position.

"It does make for strange bedfellows that Israel and Iran would seemingly be on the same side in a conflict," Cameron Hudson, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council think tank, told *Jewish Insider*.

However, he added, "We don't have full visibility that there is any intelligence or tactical support being offered by Israel, even though those relationships have existed in the past and Israel's Foreign Ministry would say Israel is not taking an active role in this conflict."

Hudson said the situation in Ethiopia was proving highly sensitive for the Israeli government. Recent visits to the country by Israeli officials and Jerusalem's recent acceptance as an "observer" in the African Union, which is headquartered in Addis Ababa, have been spun by the Ethiopian government as statements of support, he

said. Just last week, Israel's ambassador to Ethiopia, Aleligne Admasu, posted photos on Twitter of aid Israel donated to the Ethiopian Ministry of Women and Social Affairs, saying it was for "the war-displaced people in Ethiopia" and "a symbol of Israel's diplomatic and people-to-people commitment to Ethiopia."

"Israel's official line is that there is a Jewish community there that requires it to maintain ties with Abiy's government, and the idea that any Israeli government could possibly remotely tolerate a government that faces credible accusations of ethnic cleansing and genocide goes against the core and founding principles of Israel," added Hudson.

A former director of African affairs at the National Security Council in the Obama administration, Hudson said the civil war in Ethiopia was also proving challenging for other countries with ties to Ethiopia, including the United States, which has been threatening sanctions against Abiy's government if a cease-fire is not soon in place.

"The Biden administration has put itself out there and now is not living up to the

arguments that it made early on in pursuing a more values-based, human rights policy,” Hudson told JI. “Ethiopia is the U.S. gateway to Africa. It’s a diplomatic heavyweight on the continent and in the fight against terrorism, Washington is reluctant to weaken a strong, stable and strategic partner to the US.”

For Iran, however, the chaos of another African conflict has provided an opportunity. Close observers note a marked increase in air traffic between Tehran and Addis Ababa. They warn that U.S. threats to sanction Ethiopia could end up pushing the African nation even closer to the Islamic Republic and believe that after delivering Abiy certain victory in this conflict, he will owe Iran.

Observers also say that for Tehran, Ethiopia is a strategic asset – close to the Arabian Peninsula and Yemen – and the ideal location to wield its influence and build political connections, particularly after losing its traditional base in Sudan, which last September seized control of multiple lucrative assets belonging to Hamas, one of Iran’s main proxies. The move came less than a year after Sudan normalized ties with Israel.

Iran’s encroachment has already been documented by the U.S., with the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control announcing last October sanctions against the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and IRGC Quds Force (IRGC-QF) for “proliferating lethal UAVs” to Ethiopia, among other places.

Last month, the United Nations was also made aware of Iran’s presence by TPLF leader, Debretsion Gebremichael, who penned an open letter to U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stating, “the drones provided by foreign powers” were perpetuating the humanitarian crisis in Tigray and prolonging the war. He drew a direct line to the three Middle Eastern countries.

“Iran’s intervention in Ethiopia should be triggering alarm bells in Jerusalem that it will use these drones as an instrument of political influence and terror,” Mark Dubowitz, CEO of the Washington, D.C.-based Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), told JI.

“Israel is in an awkward situation because of its ties to Ethiopia,” Jason Brodsky, policy

director at United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI), told JI, also warning that there has been “an uptick in arms exports and terror, especially in recent months — with Ethiopia as ground zero for both.”

“Ethiopia has traditionally trodden carefully even in the terror cases, hesitant to directly blame Iran for the plot,” Brodsky continued, highlighting an incident early last year where Ethiopian authorities said they foiled a potential terror attack against the Emirati embassy but stopped short of saying Iran was behind the plot.

However, Brodsky said, the “fact the Emiratis are also supplying Ethiopia with drones does open up an opportunity for Israel.”

The Emirates have been seeking to limit Iranian influence and ease tensions, meeting recently with officials in Tehran. Brodsky said that the UAE’s presence could serve as a check on Iran’s activities in Ethiopia – although some have called for Israel to use its newfound influence with the UAE to halt the sale of such weapons to Ethiopia.

Major (Res.) Danny (Dennis) Citrinowicz, a senior analyst at the Maisha Group Ltd, a risk and security consultancy, added that if Israel wanted to effectively counter the threats posed by Iran then it needed to pay closer attention to events in Africa.

“Africa is becoming the next playground for Iran and becoming another front for Israel,” Citrinowicz, who previously served as head of the Iran branch of Israel’s military intelligence, told JI.

Ethiopia’s use of drones last month, he continued, “was the first time we are seeing Iranian UAVs operating outside the Middle East, and it has allowed Iran to showcase its military capabilities and try out its hardware.”

“Strife in Africa is in no shortage and Iran is seeking to take advantage of those conflicts to prove that it can survive without Western partnerships,” Citrinowicz added. “Abiy used this to preserve his position, and he will always remember how Iran helped him in his time of need.”

So far, Israel has downplayed Iran’s appearance in Ethiopia, hoping the sale was a one-off event for a leader desperate to stay in power and that a cease-fire soon will leave Ethiopia free of sanctions. In the meantime, the Jewish state is trying

to balance its concerns with sensitivities amidst a renewed push to bring to Israel up to 5,000 Ethiopian nationals whose relatives have already made aliyah. There are roughly 160,000 Israelis of Ethiopian descent currently living in Israel, including a government minister and a member of Knesset, and many still have relatives in Ethiopia.

Yonatan Freeman, an international relations expert at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, said, however, that he believed that Israel was paying close attention to all events but opting to stay quiet because of the sensitivities.

“It is in Israel’s interest that Ethiopia remains stable and does not, for example, break up,” he said. “Specifically due to Jews still being there, but also so that Iran does not enter even more into such a power vacuum.”

Freeman said Ethiopia’s new interaction with Iran was likely just about survival and that the government would not risk harming relations with Israel. “What Ethiopia is doing with Iran is about the now and about how to survive. Once the fight is over and they return to the fight for daily life, we will see once again a close relationship with the West rather than with Iran.” ♦

The Indiana senator with a bipartisan streak on the Middle East

Republican Todd Young has forged a host of unlikely foreign policy alliances on Capitol Hill. He sat down with Jewish Insider to talk about his philosophy, his role models and why it's OK for politicians to change their minds

By Gabby Deutch

For years, Sen. Chris Murphy (D-CT) has worked to articulate a “progressive foreign policy,” building a name for himself among supporters of diplomacy and anti-war activists.

He has found an unlikely ally and frequent collaborator in Sen. Todd Young, an Indiana Republican who spent the 2020 election cycle overseeing Republicans’ Senate campaign arm. The pair has led the effort in Washington to rein in the Saudi-led war in Yemen, issuing several statements together forcefully calling attention to the country’s devastating humanitarian crisis and Washington’s role in perpetuating it.

The two, who together lead the Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s Near East subcommittee, work closely together in Washington; in April, they attended a dinner at a Washington restaurant with Qatari diplomats to seek a Qatari donation to counter widespread hunger in Yemen.

In May, while Israel and Hamas were embroiled in a deadly flare-up, Young and Murphy again joined together to speak in one voice on the Middle East, issuing a joint statement calling for a cease-fire.

“Israel has the right to defend itself from Hamas’ rocket attacks, in a manner proportionate with the threat its citizens are facing,” read the statement. “As a result of Hamas’ rocket attacks and Israel’s response, both sides must recognize that too many lives have been lost and must not escalate the conflict further.”

Young was the only Republican to sign onto the letter, along with 27 other Democrats, giving the statement a coveted and rare “bipartisan” label. But several hours after the letter’s release, Young removed his name. At the time, he did not offer an explanation as to why he initially signed on.

But he told JI last week that it was a matter of changing his mind as he received more facts.

As Young remembers it, a news report suggested that Israel supported a cease-fire. “It said in there, ‘Israeli government seeks cease-fire,’” Young recalled. He later learned the reality was more complicated.

He and Murphy felt “like we should have our voices heard on this, let the state of Israel know that we have their backs on this as they try and achieve this cease-fire,” Young said. But other Republicans accused President Joe Biden, who had also called for a cease-fire, of undermining Israel’s interests. At a press conference at which Young also spoke, Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) argued that, in a phone call with then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Biden “condescended and lectured to Prime Minister Netanyahu and urged him to stop defending Israel against the terrorists.”

A spokesperson for Young told JI at the time that the senator “shares his colleagues’ concerns about a premature cease-fire or one that occurs on Hamas’ terms” and called for Israel to take out Hamas’s infrastructure in Gaza.

“This would embolden Hamas, if you call for a cease-fire before, frankly, before the State of Israel has an opportunity to respond in kind and demonstrate that Israel will respond, and that’s necessary for their own deterrence,” Young explained last week. “I was persuaded by that latter argument, unfortunately after having affixed my signature.”

“I’m willing to admit when I don’t have all the information. You never have all the information. But I learned more, and I changed my position accordingly,” said Young.

But the public divergence from Murphy,

who did not comment at the time on Young’s reversal and did not respond to a recent request for comment from JI, shows that Young’s work with progressive Democrats on foreign policy may have its limits. Murphy has been a leading supporter of the Biden administration’s efforts to renegotiate a nuclear deal with Iran, while Young decidedly opposes reentering the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

“We shouldn’t go back to the JCPOA,” Young, who is up for reelection in 2022, said. “We haven’t gotten anything for withdrawing [from the deal in 2018] and if anything, the Iranians have used their additional wherewithal to expand their malign activities across the Middle East and beyond.”

He called for increasing sanctions on Iran, and said that “we should reassure Israel that whatever they decide to do,” he explained, “we’ll be supportive of that.”

To Young, this fissure with Murphy is not indicative of a problem in their relationship, or with other sometimes-partners from across the aisle. It’s a defining feature of his approach to foreign policy. “There are no permanent partners,” said Young. “I like members who are critical thinkers. If they’re too predictable, they’re probably not my favorite members to work with. Because to be predictable often means to lack nuance or, really, critical thinking.”

In his first term in the Senate, Young has become an unexpected leader on issues of foreign policy, and one with a penchant for flying under the radar. In April, *Business Insider* called Young “the most important senator you’ve never heard of.”

“I’m so impressed with how quickly Todd Young has become one of the most consequential voices on national security and foreign policy issues,” said Liz Schrayner,

president and CEO of the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition. Her nonprofit, which advocates for U.S. global leadership through development and diplomacy, honored Young and Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) at its virtual gala earlier this month.

There is no “America First” in Young’s worldview, although he is far from a never-Trumper. Nor is there the reflexive disdain for the Biden administration’s actions espoused by many Republicans, although Young posits that the current American government is viewed as “weak” by many adversaries and allies. (This is not just about Biden, Young explained: “Our system is perceived to be weak.”)

On domestic issues, he’s a small-government conservative who doesn’t like raising taxes. On foreign policy, he takes an expansive view of America’s role in the world, and he isn’t opposed to creating new government programs to bolster what he views as “our democratic values.”

He authored the Endless Frontier Act, legislation that would counter China’s growing influence and edge in technology and artificial intelligence by creating a new office in the State Department to “improve national competitiveness in science, research, and innovation to support the national security strategy,” according to the bill’s text. The bill passed the Senate in June but has not yet been voted on by the House.

“I think the progressive label and the conservative label applies more to domestic policy,” said Young. “When it comes to foreign policy, I look for other labels. Are you a realist? Are you realistic in your analysis?”

Young thinks of himself as a realist, willing to acknowledge when situations change and when his position should change, too.

That’s what happened in Yemen: He and Murphy spent years campaigning for the U.S. to stop supporting Saudi Arabia in its campaign against the Houthi rebels in the country, but now, Young acknowledges that America’s stronger interest is in stopping the Iran-aligned Houthis, rather than ending the Saudi-led campaign entirely.

That doesn’t mean he’s ready to say America was always in the right, though.

“I’m quite certain that we, working with our friends in the region Saudi Arabia and UAE, pushed the Houthis into the arms of

the Iranians by destabilizing the region,” Young said. “It was mostly the Saudis who destabilized the region, but we gave them diplomatic cover. We gave them military support. And we’re a part of the coalition.”

More than six years after the Saudis began their campaign in the country, the Houthi rebels remain entrenched and are firmly aligned with and supported by Iran. “The Houthis have become so destabilizing, so aggressive in their activities in Saudi Arabia — specifically their targeting of the Saudis and others, including Americans who are in the country, with their drones, missiles, rockets — that we need to support the Saudis’ efforts to defend themselves,” said Young. “So as conditions change, my position as to our approach certainly needs to change.”

Still, the Indiana senator also sounded a word of caution for partners, mostly on the left, who continue to sing the same tune on Saudi Arabia’s actions in Yemen.

“The visceral apprehension that some of my colleagues have to recognize the changed circumstances in Yemen strikes me as really unwise,” Young said. “No one was more critical, more vocal against the Saudis, and to a lesser extent the Emirates and even the U.S. government when I needed to be than me. But we’re now at a point where the more serious threat to our interests and to our values is the Houthi movement.”

Young has not released any statements on Yemen with Murphy since July, when they praised Qatar’s announcement of a \$100 million donation to help alleviate the country’s humanitarian crisis. But earlier this month, the pair were not among a bipartisan group of senators who tried to stop a \$650 million arms sale to Saudi Arabia. They voted against rejecting the sale.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has become toxic in some corners of Washington since the 2018 killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. (“Which is insane,” said Young, nearly shouting: “No one paid any attention to the death of thousands and thousands and tens of thousands of people on account of starvation in Yemen when I was screaming.”) When former President Donald Trump met with the crown prince, known as MBS, in 2019, he garnered criticism for saying the Saudi

leader was doing a “spectacular job.”

Meeting with MBS should not be off-limits to Biden, Young said. But he would advise the president to meet with the crown prince, who is believed to have ordered the assassination of Khashoggi, only if there are “clear deliverables that were likely to be achieved.”

“It’s a bad habit to put the president of the United States, or for himself to go into situations where you’re not accomplishing much,” said Young, “especially at a time when many leaders and even just rank-and-file people around the world are perceiving our government to be weak.”

The realist school of thought, to which Young subscribes, has often been associated with a strong defense posture and a commitment to national security, and the idealist school of thought has been considered more diplomatic, based on the positive intentions of allies and adversaries. But Young’s vision of a strong America is not necessarily an America that rushes into military action.

His biggest priority this year has been repealing two bills authorizing military force in Iraq from 1991 and 2002. The latter has allowed four presidential administrations to strike with near-impunity in the Middle East.

Young has spearheaded the effort with Sen. Tim Kaine (D-VA). Together, they have led efforts to repeal the 2002 AUMF that has been used by presidents to justify military action far beyond Iraq. Young, who in 2001 had recently left the Marines and was working as a staffer at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, thinks the AUMF has been applied far too broadly, with most members of Congress too scared to express opposition to it.

In a June article in the *Harvard Journal on Legislation*, Kaine and Young argued that Congress’s failure to rein in presidential war powers reflects political weakness.

“This elevation of political fear over the Constitution is Capitol Hill conventional wisdom: If Congress can evade a tough vote on military action, it will. And this failing is completely bipartisan,” the senators wrote, criticizing actions taken by both Democratic and Republican administrations.

Like Murphy, Kaine has sought a leading role in the burgeoning progressive foreign

policy movement. He diverges from Young on a lot of national security issues, perhaps chief among them Iran, but they maintain a strong working relationship.

“Todd brings his military background, his conservative fidelity to constitutional principles, and his deep appreciation for U.S. diplomacy, influenced no doubt by his early work for [former Republican Sen.] Richard Lugar, to every issue,” Kaine told JI. “I pay him the highest compliment I can pay to a colleague — when you convince him on the merits of an issue, he will not let polls or polls dissuade him.”

But an understanding of the seriousness of waging war — and the constitutional requirement that Congress be involved in military strikes — does not mean Young seeks diplomacy above all else.

Young fashions himself a statesman in the mold of his former boss and mentor, Lugar, for whom he worked as a legislative assistant two decades ago. The goal is to keep learning and studying, something Young appears to take to heart.

“There are plenty of role models to be found out there,” said Young. “Usually they’re the ones who aren’t generating a lot of heat, but instead focus on creating light where they could and shining a new perspective on issues or some new facts that hadn’t been considered before.”

He ticked off a list of some of those role models that serve alongside him in the Senate: Sens. Chris Coons (D-DE), Richard Burr (R-NC), Ben Cardin (D-MD) and Bob Menendez (D-NJ).

“You’ll always find that as relates to foreign policy, there are more details to be

discovered, more nuances to be considered, and new policy instruments to be brought to bear in order to advance the U.S.’s interests,” said Young.

Bernard Hasten, a prominent Republican pro-Israel activist from Indiana, pointed out that Young’s foreign policy expertise is probably not why Indianans elected him.

“The majority of Hoosiers do not care much about foreign policy. They care more about what’s going on domestically and relying on the state of Indiana,” said Hasten, who has known Young since he first ran for the House of Representatives, where he served from 2011 to 2017 before moving to the Senate.

But Schroyer, of the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, has seen Young make the case for American global leadership to his constituents.

“I hosted him in Indianapolis with hundreds of his constituents. It was a very diverse group,” she recalled. “I remember specifically with him at this event how profoundly he connected with his constituents about why leading globally matters locally.”

One way he might bring home the importance of foreign policy leadership to his constituents back home? Soccer. He has spoken with the UAE ambassador to Washington, Yousef Al Otaiba, about bringing a soccer game between the Israeli and Emirati national teams to the Hoosier State.

“Soccer was my passion growing up. I learned a lot about life, and maybe even politics, through soccer,” Young explained. “Sports have not only been used throughout

history as a tool of statecraft, but I think currently, it’s an underutilized tool. There’s nothing that brings middle America together more than sports.”

Young has sought to expand the Abraham Accords, not just in new opportunities between the nations that forged peace deals last year but also in adding new countries to the Accords.

In a meeting with Israeli Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked last month, he brought up an idea — “and I’ll be vague, because it remains half-baked” — with the goal of “incentivizing other countries to continue to establish deeper relationships with Israel, which of course would help the United States in many respects,” Young said. “She liked the idea. It was a nice back-and-forth.”

In the meantime, there’s soccer.

Young played high school soccer in Indiana, winning a state championship for Carmel High School before going on to play Division I ball at the U.S. Naval Academy. He still hits the soccer field occasionally for exercise, and as a member of the House, he played in the annual congressional soccer game.

Call it soccer diplomacy: “To the extent we can engage in competitive activities on the field and then come off and shake one another’s hand, that’s a healthy exercise,” said Young.

“Is it going to change the world single-handedly? No, of course not,” Young acknowledged. But, he added, “I hope we can make that happen.” ♦

JANUARY 4, 2022

Nir Bar Dea tapped as Bridgewater’s new co-CEO

The co-manager of the world’s largest hedge fund got his start representing Israel on the world stage

By Jacob Miller

Nir Bar Dea, the new co-CEO of the world’s largest hedge fund, didn’t just climb the corporate ladder — he soared up it. A mere seven

years ago, he was writing speeches for Israel’s Mission to the United Nations. On Monday, in a quick, if unconventional, career arc, the Israeli-

born Bar Dea was promoted to co-lead Bridgewater Associates.

Bar Dea, 40, will be joined by Mark Bertolini, 65, to replace David McCormick,

who stepped down to prepare for a Senate run in Pennsylvania.

In 2014, Bar Dea had a five-month stint working for Israeli Ambassador to the U.N. Ron Prosor as a speechwriter, helping the career diplomat in the aftermath of that year's conflict with Gaza.

Bar Dea entered finance in 2015, starting at Bridgewater as a management associate, where he made a mark merging the research, portfolio construction, and trading departments into a single investment engine, which he ran beginning in 2019.

His meteoric ascent continued in February 2021, when he was promoted to deputy CEO, helping McCormick manage the firm and respond to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bar Dea, who hails from Even Yehuda, outside of Netanya, Israel, holds an MBA from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and studied finance at IDC Herzliya, now Reichman University. In 2020, he was named in Fortune's "40 Under 40 in Finance," owing to his quick response to the coronavirus pandemic when he swiftly relocated the firm's investment engine office outdoors so that employees could safely work without losing the proximity of an in-person office.

In his free time, Bar Dea has officiated at the weddings of friends.

As co-CEO of the company, which manages \$150 billion in assets from hundreds of clients around the globe, including pension funds, university

endowments and central banks, Bar Dea will draw upon his diverse professional experience, which includes work in real estate, at a drone start-up he founded, and his army service as a major in the Israel Defense Forces.

Until now, Bertolini served as co-chairman of Bridgewater's operating board and worked as a Bridgewater director. Prior to that, he was CEO of Aetna, Inc., an insurance company.

Bridgewater praised the "powerful combination" the new leadership duo represent in a statement signed by board chair Ray Dalio, highlighting Bertolini's "enormous experience," and Bar Dea's talents as a "well-respected internal leader." ♦

DECEMBER 23, 2021

Virginia's Victoria Virasingh navigates the progressive lane

Virasingh, in her first political run, is trying to thread a needle and 'not fit into an ideological box' as she challenges Rep. Don Beyer

By Matthew Kassel

As she embarks on her first bid for public office, Victoria Virasingh, a progressive House challenger in Northern Virginia, is in many ways borrowing from the grassroots playbook that has proven successful in recent Democratic primary upsets from the Bronx to St. Louis.

The 29-year-old Arlington native, who is mounting a long-shot campaign to unseat Rep. Don Beyer (D-VA) in Virginia's 8th Congressional District, advocates for such signature progressive policies as Medicare for All and the Green New Deal, and she has renounced contributions from corporate political action committees.

But if Virasingh expresses admiration for Reps. Cori Bush (D-MO), Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and other national progressive figureheads who have picked off entrenched incumbents over the past few years, the upstart congressional candidate emphasizes that her campaign is informed,

more than anything else, by her own background. Virasingh is the daughter of working-class immigrants. She attended Stanford University on a full scholarship, found work in the tech sector and launched her campaign this summer after returning home amid the pandemic.

"When I was sitting down and deciding our policies and what I believed in, it came from a lived experience and also a professional experience and responding to the needs of the constituents of my district," Virasingh said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* last month in the finished basement of her parents' Arlington townhouse, which doubles as her campaign headquarters. "Sometimes that's going to neatly fit in a box, and sometimes it's not."

On law enforcement, for instance, Virasingh takes a more moderate approach than the smattering of hard-line House Democrats who have called for defunding the police. "I believe in reimagining policing,"

said Virasingh, who, as a member of the NAACP's Arlington branch, favors civilian oversight boards in police misconduct investigations as well as removing law enforcement officials from public schools.

But Virasingh makes clear that she is against abolishing the police wholesale. "That comes from a lived experience of having seen situations where we needed the police," Virasingh told *JJ*, noting that she has experienced instances of harassment throughout her campaign. "I have felt more safe in my own home because of our structure."

Her stance on Israel also sets her apart. Unlike some House Democrats who have called for conditioning aid to the Jewish state, Virasingh supports continued U.S. security assistance that is guaranteed in the 10-year memorandum of understanding between the two countries, even as she expresses an affinity for the left-leaning Israel advocacy group J Street, which

argues that funding should only be used for “legitimate security purposes.”

Virasingh describes Israel as a key “partner” in the Middle East. “Our relationship and our allyship with Israel is extremely vital,” she said. “I believe in strengthening that relationship and continuing to build trust with Israel in the region. I believe in continuing to provide aid to Israel, as we’ve always done, in order to reach that solution.”

Her views are undergirded by professional experience. As a former employee of Palantir, the Silicon Valley data firm, Virasingh traveled to Israel in 2017, where she was tasked with exploring technology in the workforce. “I was truly inspired by the innovation economy there,” said Virasingh, who specialized in public-private partnerships at Palantir. “I learned so many things, and coming back here, it’s really helped me put a lot of foreign policy positions that I have into perspective.”

As the granddaughter of Punjabi-Sikh refugees who fled their homeland during India’s partition in 1947 and later settled in Thailand, where her father was born, Virasingh says she also feels a personal connection with Israel. “I definitely feel a sense of kinship,” she explained. “I really want to advocate and fight to make sure that we’re building long-term peace in the region.”

Amanda Berman, the founder and executive director of Zioness, a nonprofit coalition of progressive pro-Israel activists, said she met Virasingh “because she had expressed an interest in learning about the priorities of the Jewish community,” as Berman put it in an email to JI, “and because, especially given her family’s own refugee story and her experiences growing up, she sees herself as an ally to Jews and other minorities who have had to fight for the American dream.”

“She is a pragmatic progressive who does not fit neatly into an ideological box, and she rejects outright the antisemitic notion that Zionist Jews should be pushed out of the progressive movement,” Berman said of Virasingh, adding: “She is relatable, smart, energetic and aware of how complex Israel- and antisemitism-related issues can get, and she is open and eager to engage in good faith and learn how to be the ally she

intends to be.”

While Virasingh expresses broad support for the Jewish state, however, her hesitation with regard to supplemental funding for Israel’s Iron Dome missile-defense system suggests that she may still be working her way through the issue.

Virasingh initially declined to confirm whether she supports legislation that would provide \$1 billion to replenish the Iron Dome following violence between Israel and Hamas last May, noting that she would need to give the matter further thought. The measure, which passed by a vote of 420 to 9 in the House last September, was opposed by a vocal handful of far-left Democrats and one libertarian Republican in a contentious floor vote. The legislation is currently stalled in the Senate.

“I don’t want to be presumptive about how I would vote on the Iron Dome funding, but I would hope to be more proactive on the policy prior to the vote itself,” Virasingh clarified in an email a few weeks later. “Although I am not intimately involved in the nuances of Iron Dome technology, I recognize that it is a military innovation created in tandem with our own United States military.”

Virasingh expressed appreciation for Sen. Bernie Sanders’s (I-VT) suggestion that the U.S. provide the same amount of funding for Gaza. “But I think \$1 billion divided between Iron Dome and targeted grassroots efforts of co-education programs, interfaith grants and helping cultivate an economic center within the Palestinian territories,” she said, “could help provide a two-pronged strategy.”

Lloyd Wolf, a professional photographer and Jewish community activist in Arlington, said he has spoken with Virasingh about Israel and concluded that she is still sussing out the finer details of her approach. “My sense is she hadn’t spent a lot of time on the issue,” he said, acknowledging that “it’s not an easy learning curve” for first-time candidates who haven’t previously explored such issues in depth.

But Wolf, who is supporting Virasingh in the June primary, said he was confident that she would take it seriously. “I think she’s smart enough to figure it out,” he said.

Beyer, too, appears to have been trying to find the appropriate calibration on Israel in

recent months. During the conflict between Israel and Hamas in May, he released a statement calling for “a ceasefire as soon as possible” while condemning Hamas’s rocket attacks. “At the same time, the Palestinian people also have the right to safety and security,” he added. “I condemn the excessive use of force against the Palestinian protestors in Jerusalem and the forcible removal of Palestinians from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah.”

Recently, Wolf interviewed and photographed Virasingh as a subject in the “Columbia Pike Documentary Project,” an ongoing series highlighting local community members that is housed in the permanent collection of the Library of Virginia.

Virasingh, who identifies as Latino and Indian — her mother is from Ecuador — was born and raised in Arlington, an ethnically diverse city with a sizable immigrant population. “At times, we were just surviving on my mom’s minimum wage job as a manicurist plus tips,” she said of her childhood. “I think that experience really taught me the value of the dollar and what it’s like to be on the fringes and to be part of a vulnerable community.”

“My family and I were actually homeless for a few years when I was very young, and we lived in a variety of different situations,” Virasingh recalled. “But slowly, bit by bit, my parents were able to save money. I remember the day that we moved into our very own apartment unit. That was a very big day.”

Virasingh spent a few summers interning with Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) in Washington, D.C., before graduating from college with a degree in international relations. With Palantir, Virasingh, who was based in Palo Alto, Calif., created and led the company’s future-of-work team, collaborating with labor leaders around the U.S.

She did similar work in Germany in recent years and was impressed with the country’s approach to remembering the Holocaust. “Here in the U.S., I think what we’re missing is an acknowledgment of our past,” said Virasingh, who learned German abroad and is fluent in Spanish (her first language), French, Italian and Portuguese (as well as some Thai). “There are people in the district who lived through segregation. What are we doing to really recognize and

acknowledge our past so that we can move forward? I think there's a lot we can learn from Germany."

"Seeing how things worked there within workforce development, social development, healthcare, paid time off for families and moms, the way that work is structured, it was extremely eye-opening," she added. "Those experiences I'm hoping to bring with me as I start to create policies that, I think, start to shift us into a system where we do create a safety net for folks here."

When Virasingh moved back to the district, where Amazon recently planted its second headquarters, she felt that Arlington had become less accommodating for working-class families — including her cousin, who, she says, is about to be kicked out of her salon as real estate developers eye opportunity.

"I remember growing up here, people who would move in would be teachers, they'd be policemen, firemen," she said. "Now, when you look at the workforce, I mean, firemen can't live here."

The more she saw, Virasingh said, "the more it was evident to me that we have a necessity for leadership that understands the realities of today's economy, that understands the realities of what it means to work a minimum-wage job and to survive on that."

The congressional hopeful suggested

that her particular skill set has been lacking in progressive circles. "I have a very strong stance on the economy," Virasingh said, arguing that her tenure in the technology sector lends credibility to her campaign as she champions proposals aimed at propping up underserved communities. "That's one of the things, I feel like, is missing from the progressive side: What is our stance on the economy?"

She announced her candidacy in July. "We're living in a kind of post-pandemic world, we are living in a new reality, we are living in a new economy, and how and where we work has changed," she told JI last month. "How we see our leaders has transformed. Who is filling those spots?"

Virasingh, who now lives with her parents in the townhouse they have owned since the 1990s, is currently running something of a barebones operation. But she says she is building a reliable volunteer base, and supporters told JI that they would either be hosting meet-and-greets or fundraisers for her in the coming weeks. Roy Bahat, who runs the Bloomberg Beta venture capital firm in San Francisco, has donated to her campaign, which pulled in just over \$91,000 between July and September, according to the latest filings from the Federal Election Commission.

By contrast, Beyer, a moderate Democrat who has held office since 2015 and is among the wealthiest members of Congress, has

raised approximately \$680,000.

Aaron Fritschner, a Beyer campaign spokesperson, told JI that the congressman welcomes the challenge from Virasingh. "The seat doesn't belong to him," Fritschner said. "If people want to challenge him, that's up to them, but he's going to continue to make the case for why he should be reelected by doing his job."

Though the primary is still in its early stages, Jeremy Mayer, a political scientist at George Mason University, believes that Virasingh is a viable contender. "Beyer has his longtime supporters, and they need to take this seriously," Mayer told JI. "It's a real threat to his reelection at this point."

Virasingh, he said, "has a much better chance to tap into the rage and frustration felt by the Democratic grassroots than Beyer does."

For her part, Virasingh believes the district is ready for new leadership.

"When I looked at the priorities of the voters and the priorities of the district and the leadership, I didn't see those priorities being translated," she told JI. "I didn't see those issues being advocated for in the way that they needed to be. It started to trigger something in me. We can't just wait. We can't just say, 'Oh, well, he's nice, so therefore, we should just keep him,' when, I think, we need to advocate for leaders who understand what it's like and are willing to do something about it." ♦

JANUARY 5, 2022

Ohio GOP Senate candidates shy away from two-state solution

Former state party chair Jane Timken was the only candidate to endorse a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

By Matthew Kassel

Five of the six of Ohio's leading Republican Senate primary candidates refrained from explicitly supporting a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — if not opposing the concept outright — in questionnaires solicited by *Jewish Insider*.

Out of six candidates who submitted answers to a range of questions, just one, former GOP state party chair Jane Timken, directly endorsed a two-state solution, even as she put forth caveats.

Others, including State Sen. Matt Dolan and Cleveland businessmen Bernie Moreno and Mike Gibbons, suggested favoring the

approach in theory but were pessimistic about the possibility or desirability of pursuing negotiations at present. J.D. Vance, the *Hillbilly Elegy* author and venture capitalist, was largely ambivalent and said he would defer to Israel on the matter.

Former Ohio State Treasurer Josh Mandel went a step further than his

opponents, rejecting the idea entirely — a position that few Republicans have been willing to adopt publicly.

The distinct lack of enthusiasm for establishing an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel represents a turn away from a longstanding pillar of American foreign policy in the Middle East that, until recently, had been embraced by Republicans and Democrats alike.

Under former President Donald Trump, however, the GOP largely ignored that goal. Despite resistance from some pro-Israel groups, the party omitted references to a two-state solution in its 2016 platform — which it renewed in 2020 — broadly favoring the “establishment of comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East, to be negotiated among those living in the region.”

In a 2019 House vote, a minuscule minority of five Republicans broke with their party and approved a resolution affirming support for a two-state solution. The measure passed 226-188, with most GOP House members voting no.

Such pushback has also found its way to the Senate. This past July, Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) blocked the advancement of legislation promoting normalization between Israel and a number of Arab states — part of an effort to build on the Abraham Accords brokered by the Trump administration — because of language supporting a two-state solution.

The senator has argued that the Israelis and the Palestinians should work out a resolution themselves, without U.S. involvement. “By declaring that it is United States policy to support a two-state deal,” Cruz said after the bill cleared the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in June, “we’re going backwards on the promise we made in the last four years.”

The bill was introduced by a bipartisan group of senators, including Sen. Rob Portman (R-OH), whom Ohio’s Republican primary candidates are competing to replace when he retires at the end of his current term.

But that has hardly registered in a race where most leading candidates are jockeying for Trump’s endorsement, which he has yet to announce. The relatively uniform manner in which the candidates have jettisoned what had been viewed as

the accepted orthodoxy on two states is just one demonstration of the manner in which Trump’s influence over party dynamics is dominating the primary.

Even as Timken endorsed a two-state solution “to bring lasting peace to the Middle East,” as she wrote in her questionnaire, using language that appeared to have been borrowed directly from the GOP platform, the Senate hopeful included a number of provisions that could hinder such plans.

For instance, Timken supports, as she put it, Israel’s “right to annex portions of the West Bank” — a goal that former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu agreed to abandon as a condition of the Abraham Accords in the summer of 2020.

In the survey solicited by JI, Timken praised the accords as “a symbolic fulfillment of God’s covenant with Abraham and one of President Trump’s greatest accomplishments that should be built upon.”

Moreno, for his part, also used language echoing the Republican Party’s Israel platform plank in his questionnaire. “I will support meaningful efforts to bring a lasting peace to the region,” he wrote, “but I will never pressure Israel to make compromises or concessions that threaten the security of the Jewish State. The core issues separating the Israelis and Palestinians can only be resolved by negotiations between the two parties, not by international organizations.”

But he was skeptical that a resolution would be imminent, arguing that the “the Palestinian Authority has routinely demonstrated an unwillingness to honor the conditions laid out in previous agreements.”

Gibbons expressed a similar view. “A two-state solution in a perfect world would be the best solution,” he told JI. “However, given the stance of the Palestinian people and their obsession with the destruction of Israel, it is difficult to imagine a negotiated two-state solution at this time. When Israel decides that the time is right to pursue a two-state negotiation I will support whatever Israel prefers.”

In his response, Dolan was equally adamant that “a two-state solution will remain elusive,” as he put it, “until terrorist groups like Hamas and the more militant and extreme parts of the Palestinian Authority are no longer a threat to peace.”

Adopting a somewhat more bombastic posture, Vance, who referred to the Palestinian people using quotation marks, argued that “details really matter” when it comes to addressing the conflict.

“We can’t give the ‘Palestinians’ a nation if they’re just going to use it to collect foreign aid, which they then spend on training young people to blow themselves up in Israeli (or American) restaurants,” he said. “On this question, I’d defer to Israel and other regional allies. If there’s use in creating another state for the Arabs in the region, and our allies want that to happen, I’m not going to stand in the way. But I don’t like our country using its leverage to bully Israel to do something against its sovereignty.”

Throughout the questionnaire, which touched on such issues as antisemitism and the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting the Jewish state as well as other foreign policy matters, Vance remained strident in defending his views, despite some points of tension.

In one response, Vance deployed an analogy that appeared to liken Nazi Germany to China while arguing in favor of “an open public square” free from the influence of “large technology companies” and “global corporations.”

“The idea that we would have permitted Hitler’s Germany to own and influence major American newspapers in 1942 is preposterous,” Vance said, “yet we give China more control over our modern discourse in 2021, and they’re arguably more dangerous.”

In a separate answer, Vance expressed support for \$1 billion in supplemental funding for Israel’s Iron Dome missile-defense system that passed the House last September. “I would have voted to support funding for Iron Dome,” he told JI. “Iron Dome is essential to ensuring Israel’s defense and helps to keep innocent citizens, children and families safe from outside threat.”

But elsewhere in the questionnaire, Vance argued against increasing U.S. “foreign aid to anyone,” adding, “and I think we ought to cut it to many nations.”

While some, including Gibbons and Timken, favor reducing foreign aid, they both supported continued security assistance for Israel — as did every other candidate in the race who was queried by JI.

Each of the six candidates also expressed

support for supplemental Iron Dome funding. Dolan, in his response, said “it is shameful that any Senator, of either party, would use their office to delay or deny this critical funding for one of America’s closest allies” — a possible reference to Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY), who is currently stalling the legislation in the upper chamber.

Mandel was the only candidate who proposed the possibility of increasing the amount of U.S. foreign aid to Israel, which is guaranteed in a 10-year memorandum of understanding between the two countries, though he did not go into specifics. “Maintain or increase for Israel,” he said bluntly. “Eliminate for countries that hate us.”

Like Vance, with whom he has traded barbs on social media, Mandel was provocative throughout his questionnaire, befitting of a candidate who is eagerly presenting himself as the most dedicated Trump acolyte in the race.

Railing against “Sharia law,” “critical race theory” and progressive Democrats he views as antisemitic, Mandel argued for the “need to eradicate radical Islamists and leftist cultural jihadists from our government,” adding: “I will govern with two documents in hand: the Bible and the Constitution.”

His opposition to a two-state solution, however, seems particularly notable, given that Senate Republicans do not appear to have arrived at that position. “The Palestinians are not interested in peace or a two-state solution,” Mandel wrote in his questionnaire. “They are interested in pushing the Jews into the sea.”

“Look no further than how quickly the Palestinians destroyed Gush Katif to understand why not one inch of land should be given to them,” Mandel concluded, referring to the Israeli settlement bloc in the Gaza Strip that was forcibly evacuated by the Israeli army in 2005.

In an interview with *JI* this past

February, Mandel, who is Jewish, did not reveal his opposition to a two-state solution but hinted at the position he put forth in the questionnaire.

“I believe that Jews have the biblical right to live, build and prosper in every corner of Judea, Samaria and the entirety of Israel,” he said, using the biblical name for territory that encompasses the West Bank.

Mandel, in his questionnaire, sounded somewhat more conciliatory while addressing the Abraham Accords, arguing that the Biden administration “not only maintain support” for the agreements but also proactively “engage ‘with Israel and other countries to expand regional cooperation, including between Israel and the Palestinians.’”

“What Israel and the Palestinians could achieve through peace has no bounds,” Mandel added. “Normalization of relations, while maintaining security, is the best path forward for both peoples.” ♦

DECEMBER 23, 2021

At Sunflower Bakery, life skills baked into the kosher cookies

The Rockville, Md., nonprofit cafe helps young adults with learning differences chart their own course

By Gabby Deutch

On a recent Wednesday at lunchtime, the lobby of a large Rockville, Md., office building was nearly empty. Home to the offices of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, the building should have been filled with nonprofit professionals taking meetings or grabbing a quick lunch. But the normally busy hallways were quiet, with most of the building’s employees still working remotely due to the pandemic.

Inside Cafe Sunflower, the lobby-level bakery and coffee shop, a young employee named Michael excitedly greeted a customer. He rattled off the list of beverages he could make: single or double latte? Add fudge and make it a mocha? Low-fat milk or

almond milk? He stood by, eager to serve, and he made a delicious cappuccino.

In front of him was a glass case filled with kosher cookies, cakes and other baked goods. Everything in the shop had been made by the students at Sunflower Bakery’s training kitchen a couple of miles away, where young adults with learning disabilities are taught the basics of baking and independent living: showing up to work on time, maintaining professionalism, communicating with employers and colleagues.

Michael is one of those students.

“So many people who have been in special ed or received additional services all the way through school have been told always what they don’t do well, what they don’t know, the things that they can’t do.

Their self-esteem really reflects that,” said Sara Portman Milner, a social worker who co-founded Sunflower Bakery in 2008 with Laurie Wexler. “When they leave school, and they’re supposed to get a job, their anxiety level is through the roof, because they’ve only really been told what they can’t do. They haven’t really been told, ‘You’re a wonderful human being, you’re capable of learning to be able to do something,’ and continually supported.”

Wexner and Milner say this type of skills-based training program is largely nonexistent, both in the D.C. area and beyond. Some establishments have garnered attention for employing only or mostly people with disabilities, like Bitty & Beau’s Coffee, a cafe that employs people with

intellectual and developmental disabilities with locations in 12 states.

But what Sunflower Bakery does — training those people to then go into the community and get jobs at other institutions alongside neurotypical individuals — is much rarer. (Not to mention that the Rockville area, home to a large Jewish population, lacked a kosher bakery.)

Research shows an acute need for training services and support for that community. Twenty-eight percent of adults with intellectual disabilities have never held jobs, according to data from the Special Olympics. Only one-third of adults with intellectual disabilities between the ages of 21 and 64 are employed. Decades of research from social scientists shows a high correlation between having an intellectual disability and living in poverty.

“Those are staggering statistics,” said Jody Tick, who took over for Wexler as the bakery’s executive director last summer.

Sunflower’s pastry arts and hospitality programs together train about 36 students annually; each of them is with Sunflower for six months before finding jobs elsewhere. Just a handful stay on after as paid employees if they aren’t able to find jobs in the community.

“They’re treated like they’re going to be treated out in the real world, because it doesn’t help them to sugarcoat it,” said Wexler. Students learn things like “how to advocate for yourself, how to show up every day clean, ready to go, leave your stuff at the door. How to have a professional conversation. Not bringing your personal stuff or your personal questions to work. These are things that even employers that don’t hire our students say, [that] they wish their employees would learn these skills as well.”

Hospitality students learn the hard skills of working point-of-sales systems, making beverages like Michael’s, packaging and merchandising. It’s also the soft skill of customer service, which does not work for all of Sunflower Bakery’s students.

“Some people who are introverts, like that just exhausts them to no end,” said Tick.

When Wexler and Milner created Sunflower over a decade ago, all they knew was that too few young adults with learning differences were being trained to

enter the labor force, and that there weren’t enough kosher baked goods in their part of Montgomery County.

“We started in Beth Shalom, which is my synagogue, in the kitchen. They just donated space,” Wexler recalled. The initial handful of students were “young adults that learned about it from therapists who said they were interested, and the Jewish Foundation for Group Homes.” (Today, the bakery does not require students to be Jewish.)

She and Milner went around to synagogue members and other friends in the local Jewish community, giving out honey cakes for free to show that not only were they doing a good thing, they and the trainees were also baking something that tasted good.

Today, the nonprofit is funded by a mix of donations and revenue. Sunflower sells about \$500,000 of baked goods yearly, and students also have to pay a fee to be part of the training program (paid by either their family, a state or local agency or a grant).

After less than a year, the growing team moved out of the synagogue and into a dedicated space — and a few years later, they moved into a stand-alone building on Halpine Road that Sunflower funded and built.

Inside is another cafe space, behind which is the training kitchen. At the time of *Jewish Insider*’s visit, students were working with challah dough, learning to cut it into the three pieces for a braid and weighing each on a baking scale.

“For so many people who have developmental disabilities, they can’t handle many other kinds of situations, but they can learn through repetition and structure. People, especially on the autism spectrum, it’s a great match for them, because many of them like everything the same: routine, ritual,” said Milner.

A whiteboard that hangs kitty-corner to a large storage unit filled with baking supplies lists the day’s steps, with a preview of the next day’s as well. Students receive weekly lesson plans so that nothing comes as a surprise to them.

“We pride ourselves on how people learn the best,” said John Katz, who worked as a chef at fine-dining restaurants before joining Sunflower Bakery as its program director. “Everything is very scripted over

here.”

The steps for making challah are written out in simple, straightforward language: Scale. Mix 10 minutes. Ferment. Punch. Portion. One section of the board explains basic work requirements. “Remember: Walk with purpose. Work with urgency. Work in your own space. Eye contact.”

Liz Hutter, the bakery’s culinary director, joined Sunflower after a career as a pastry chef working in high-end bakeries. “I had been feeling a little unfulfilled,” Hutter said. This job wasn’t what she had planned for her next step — “I was thinking more like women’s rights” — but since she came on early in the bakery’s history, she created much of the training program from scratch.

Much of it is instruction that an average neurotypical baker wouldn’t think twice about. But if Hutter told the students to arrange cookies in alternating rows of seven and six on a tray, they couldn’t do it.

“You tell that to someone with a disability, sometimes they’ll put seven cookies in a row, six cookies in a row, and they’ll put them all up in the corner,” Hutter explained. “Then you say something like, ‘Well, spread them out evenly.’ They can’t do that. They can’t see the differentiation.”

So she put together a curriculum, creating new methods to help her students learn skills that might seem like common knowledge to others.

“I’m trying to teach them how to feel and experience independence in the workplace. It’s not just a pastry skill. They’re going to have to learn new skills everywhere they go,” she said.

Many of the students go to work in local bakeries and restaurants, but some choose other industries.

“I have students right now at hospitals, country clubs, private bakeries, a chocolaterie, wholesale bakeries,” said Katz. One student recently landed an interview for a front-desk post at a veterinarian’s office. Katz helps them through the employment process, and he also stays in touch in their early months on the job. The transition is often not easy.

“There’s a lot of sad stories, honestly. And I wish we could get through to more employers, so they would understand what the potential is,” noted Hutter. “Other times it’s the opposite experience, where

someone's like, 'Oh, I had no idea this was going to be such a great experience for my staff. They get to see this too. It helps the whole morale of my business.'"

Katz tracks progress not just in terms of getting students jobs. It's the other things they work up the confidence to do as well. "In this last year, I've had six students gaining the confidence to move out and live independently. I have two that work part-time jobs while going back to college. I have three that have gotten driver's licenses,"

Katz noted.

The bakery is not meant to be a one-stop shop for all of customers' baking needs. The students learn through repetition, and elaborate custom cakes are not in the mix.

Katz said, "99.9% of [customers] are like, 'Oh my God, now I love it even more,'" upon learning of Sunflower's mission. "But then you have that .01% that's like, 'I still want a purple sheet cake with, you know, fondant and dinosaur statues and all this,' and we're like, 'Yeah, we're just not that.'"

But there are also customers who want to support Sunflower, which makes seasonal Jewish baked goods — hamantaschen on Purim, menorah cookies on Hanukkah — and hope it might make some Christian-themed goodies, too.

"I can't tell you how many times we get requests for Christmas cookies or Yule logs or coconut cakes on Easter," Katz said, laughing. "They're like, 'Yeah, I don't care. We want to support you.' So yes, the community at large has supported us." ♦

DECEMBER 30, 2021

Visions of Abraham offers Jewish tourists to the UAE an interfaith experience

The group seeks to provide an experience that looks at the impact of the Abraham Accords

By Rebecca Anne Proctor

Tens of thousands of Israelis and Jews from around the world have visited the United Arab Emirates following last year's historic signing of the Abraham Accords, many of them coming with a desire to learn about the intersection between the two cultures. And now, a new U.S.-based nonprofit is spearheading the effort to create and promote educational initiatives relating to interfaith programming between Muslims and Jews.

Visions of Abraham (VOA) seeks to provide an experience that looks at the impact of the landmark agreement through the creation of bespoke and immersive tours of the UAE and its Jewish community.

"Visions of Abraham encourages all levels of Jewish travel to the UAE," Eli Epstein, the organization's co-founder, told *Jewish Insider*. "We believe that experiencing the UAE allows for discovery of the people and the UAE and their values as well as the many amazing activities."

The country saw an uptick in Jewish tourists during Hanukkah, when visitors from around the world came to celebrate the holiday with the local community — with many Emirati government officials also in attendance at the festivities.

In what *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman has called possibly "one of the most significant realignments in modern Middle East history," the Accords have prompted not only business and trade — \$570 million, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics — between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, but also interreligious and cultural dialogue. For example, new Hebrew-language schools holding classes in Dubai and Abu Dhabi include numerous Emiratis wishing to study in Israel or do business there.

Visions of Abraham has already begun offering its services to Jewish organizations planning delegations to the UAE and looking for an experience in the Gulf country that is tied to the Abraham Accords.

Most recently, the UJA-Federation of New York and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee collaborated with VOA to offer customized tours of the UAE for their delegations. During their stay, individuals from both delegations met with notable UAE personalities from the nonprofit, business and education sectors, including Sarah Al Amiri, minister of state for science & technology; Israeli Ambassador to the UAE Amir Hayek; Ambassador Marcy Grossman, Canada's envoy to the Gulf

nation; Ali Al Nuaimi, chairman of Hedayah; Mohammed Alabbar, founder and chairman of Emaar Properties; and Tahnoon Saif, CEO of Dubai South, among others. The delegations also toured the Abrahamic Family House, the interfaith complex on Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island, scheduled to open in 2022.

Epstein explained that VOA specializes in making "in-depth encounters with the leadership of the UAE to enhance the understanding and appreciation of the country especially in the context of the Abraham Accords."

"We arrange meetings depending on the group's interest, and we can arrange for them to meet UAE leaders in business, education, religion or politics, for example," he added. "We want our visitors to experience as much as possible of Emirati culture and the openness that is so apparent in their hospitality and to engage Jews from around the world and especially from Israel."

VOA also donates profits to the Jewish Community of the Emirates (JCE) — and vice versa — enabling both to continue to welcome visitors.

"The JCE is allocating the funds it receives from Visions of Abraham for our operational expenses, which include

hosting Shabbat and holiday meals for visitors and community members alike,” Alex Peterfreund, co-founder of Dubai’s Jewish community, told JI. “These Shabbat meals are extraordinarily exciting as we also have our Muslim neighbors join us and together, we discuss Muslim-Jewish relations. Additionally, the funds will go toward educational programs for children.”

Participants from the delegations explained how the VOA-organized experience in the UAE shattered their long-held stereotypes of the Gulf nation.

“Most on the trip were seeing the miracle called the UAE for the first time, with most preconceived notions shattered by the reality of what they experienced,” Jeff Schoenfeld, a delegation member, told JI. “I have been traveling to the UAE for over 30 years, and I found myself elated by the consistency and intentionality of the pro-women, pro-equality, pro-pluralism, pro-growth narrative that guides the country today. The pace of change is exponential now, with the Abraham Accords just the latest manifestation of the leadership that

the UAE is bringing to the entire Gulf region.”

Since the signing of the Accords, cross-cultural, multifaith initiatives have sprung up organically in the UAE, Israel and elsewhere. Some are bilateral, between the UAE and Israel, while others are trilateral, between the UAE, Israel and the U.S., while still others include the entire Gulf region.

“There is much work ahead to build understanding between Muslims and Jews, and we sensed a great willingness — top-down and bottom-up — to foster this exchange,” Schoenfeld said. ♦

DECEMBER 15, 2021

Eric Adams taps Orthodox Jews for top posts

Appointments highlight the New York City mayor’s longstanding ties with Brooklyn’s Jewish community

By Matthew Kassel

Eric Adams, the newly minted Democratic mayor of New York City, announced members of his senior staff on Wednesday in a list of appointments featuring several Jewish officials who will assume a variety of high-ranking roles within the administration.

Notably, the mayor named two Orthodox Jewish officials to his operations team, including Menashe Shapiro, a veteran political consultant who worked on the Adams campaign, and Fred Kreizman, who served as deputy commissioner for community outreach in the administration of former Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Both are graduates of Yeshiva University.

At City Hall, Shapiro will serve as deputy chief of staff, while Kreizman will oversee the mayor’s community affairs unit as commissioner.

“I can’t remember a time in recent history when there have been two Orthodox Jews at senior levels in an administration,” David Greenfield, the CEO of the anti-poverty group Met Council who is co-chairing Adams’s health and human services transition, said in an interview with *Jewish Insider*.

Both appointments “signify the warm

relationship” that Adams has developed with Jewish community members in New York, according to Greenfield, a former city councilmember.

As an elected official, Adams built a strong rapport with the Orthodox Jewish community, particularly in Brooklyn, where he most recently served for eight years as borough president. Previously, he was a state senator representing Crown Heights and other neighborhoods in Kings County.

In an interview with JI last February, Adams, a former police captain, suggested that such relationships began during his career in law enforcement.

“I think it was born out of policing when, as a lieutenant, I was introduced to many of these security patrols, and from those patrols, I started to see the high level of volunteerism,” he recalled. “The Jewish community, particularly the Orthodox community, within their language, is giving back.”

Adams, who is the second Black mayor of New York City, earned endorsements from several prominent Orthodox leaders during the mayoral primaries, despite some competition from Andrew Yang, the former presidential candidate who developed close

connections with Jewish communities in Brooklyn.

Jewish community leaders praised the mayor’s new team in interviews with JI on Wednesday.

“These appointments are the latest selections which demonstrate a mayor dedicated to inclusivity and a diverse administration,” said Maury Litwack, the executive director of Teach Coalition, a nonprofit educational advocacy group affiliated with the Orthodox Union. “Menashe and Fred are well-respected, talented and hard-working people with a long history of public service.”

Josh Mehlman, chairman of the Flatbush Jewish Community Coalition, which endorsed Adams in the primary, agreed. “Eric Adams chose wisely by appointing his senior team today,” he told JI, characterizing Shapiro as a “brilliant strategist” who “works hard and is fiercely dedicated to the mayor’s success.”

Kreizman, he added, is “well-known as an experienced advocate for our community.”

More broadly, Jarrod Bernstein, who worked with Kreizman in the Bloomberg administration — and is a co-host of JI’s “Limited Liability Podcast” — said the

newly designated commissioner is known for his close engagement with communities of all stripes.

“Many would cast this as a sort of appointment with the Orthodox community in mind,” Bernstein told JI. “But Fred is a person of many communities,” including Muslim and Christian New Yorkers.

Aside from Shapiro and Kreizman, the mayor also named Edward Mermelstein, a Soviet-born Jewish attorney and investor who is well-known within New York City’s Russian Jewish community, as commissioner of international affairs.

Andrea Shapiro Davis, CUNY’s interim

vice chancellor for university advancement, is another high-level Jewish staffer who will serve as senior advisor and director of public service engagement in the mayor’s office — “an inspired choice to be in charge of appointments and talent,” according to Mitchell Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at New York University.

Adam’s appointments “have included the best and brightest from the Jewish community,” said Jeff Leb, a political consultant in New York. The mayor “has consistently demonstrated that he won’t put politics ahead of getting the job done.”

David Pollock, director of public policy

and security at the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, said that “Adams is successfully putting together a mature and diverse team.”

“Better yet,” said Pollock, whose organization represents the Jewish community to New York government officials and counts more than 50 local Jewish groups as members, “many of the appointments have a long track record of working with the JCRC-NY and Jewish communities in past public and private roles.” ♦