

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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MARCH 11, 2022

Alserkal Avenue, the Dubai arts district with a multicultural vision

The Arab world's leading arts hub kicks off its 2022 Art Week with a diverse, cutting-edge lineup of events

By Rebecca Anne Proctor

This article first appeared in The Circuit.

Imagine New York's City's Soho or Miami's Wynwood, once-neglected manufacturing districts dotted with warehouses repurposed as artists' lofts and sleek art galleries offering cutting-edge work. Now imagine these two arts districts on overdrive — art galleries, restaurants, performance spaces, artists studios, a yoga studio, a jewelry workshop, a photography center, an independent vinyl record shop, a hip clothing boutique housed within a design gallery, even an Italian bespoke shoe shop — spread across 500,000 square feet and 90 low-slung warehouses.

That's Alserkal Avenue in Dubai, the cultural capital of the United Arab Emirates.

The arts and culture district, established in 2008 by Emirati businessman and cultural patron Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal, is tucked away inside the dusty environs of Dubai's Al Quoz industrial district. Alserkal's desire was to cultivate a vibrant creative community and support cultural production in Dubai, and this week's

Alserkal Art Week exemplifies such aims.

In recent years, Alserkal Avenue, which was home to only a handful of art galleries and hardly known in 2009 — not even by the city's taxi drivers — has expanded into a community including over 70 contemporary art galleries, visual and performing arts organizations, designers, homegrown and entrepreneur-led businesses.

"It is never easy to be the 'first' or a pioneer, because there is no model or playbook you can follow," Vilma Jurkute, executive director of Alserkal and its various initiatives, told *The Circuit*.

"I take comfort in advice someone once gave me — 'don't be afraid of uncertainty, it means you are innovating,'" she added. "To be honest, when we started, I feel like the West didn't know what to do with us because we didn't fit any of their 'boxes,' in terms of art paradigms. We began as an arts neighborhood in the Al Quoz industrial area, then through Alserkal Avenue's expansion in 2016 we extended our platform to welcome a curated community of entrepreneurs across various industries, acting as a building block for the creative economy locally."

To that end, last April Alserkal Avenue

launched Alserkal Advisory, an independent and privately owned arts consultancy practice that aims to "consciously reimagine cultural destinations and public programs that connect with and inspire communities," according to its website. Jurkute will lead the agency.

The Art Week, which kicked off on March 3 and runs until March 13, features a lineup of exhibitions, talks and events by more than 20 of the region's leading spaces and arts institutions.

Of note is "A Slightly Curving Place," an exhibition curated by Nida Ghouse that presents the first ambisonic, or three-dimensional, surround-sound installation staged by Alserkal Arts Foundation at Concrete, Alserkal Avenue's sleek multidisciplinary exhibition venue designed by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA). The exhibition, based on the practice of acoustic archeologist and sound technician Umashankar Manthravadi, rethinks curatorial practice — pushing the boundaries of what an exhibition can do — while remaining sensitive to critical debates that call into question the role of new technologies.

A public program in conjunction with the show, held on March 5 and titled “Coming to Know,” was staged by Ghouse and Brooke Holmes, a professor of classics at Princeton University; it offered collaborators the opportunity to convene in public discourse, emphasizing the multicultural and forward-thinking mission of Alserkal Avenue.

“We aim to experiment with other ways of forming communities around a shared attention to a premodern past,” Holmes and Ghouse told *The Circuit*. “‘To come to know’ something speaks to the desire that brings a subject to a place where they might learn, as well as to the promise of a form of recognition that transforms one’s relationship with what seems other, foreign and distant.”

“In proposing listening as a modality for approaching the past, we set aside the predominantly visual techniques of knowledge that are characteristic of archaeological research, museology and the larger project of colonial modernity to possess the past, especially a premodern past deemed classical or ancient, as an object of timeless value capable of legitimating the present,” they added.

The exhibition and seminar, the two suggested, is an attempt at connecting our present, past and the rapidly rising and evolving current culture of new technology.

“Alserkal Avenue is a vibrant space and a catalyst to build cultural connectivity

between East, West and the Far East with a forward-thinking outlook,” Durjoy Rahman, a Bangladeshi entrepreneur and art philanthropist told *The Circuit*. Rahman founded the Durjoy Bangladesh Foundation (DBF), which promotes South Asian artists and perspectives to an international audience. The foundation sponsored the “Coming to Know” seminar.

Alserkal Avenue’s cosmopolitan makeup is drawing art professionals from all over the world. Prominent Indian contemporary art gallery Volte Art Projects opened in September 2021. After running the gallery for 14 years in Mumbai, Tushar Jiwarajka, a former financier, decided to open in Dubai.

“Dubai is moving from being more region-focused to more international,” Jiwarajka told *The Circuit*. “As more and more people move here from around the world, the arts scene here is finding itself moving alongside the trajectory of major art cities around the world. This is an exciting time to be part of the Dubai arts scene, and we look forward to growing alongside it.”

Volte Art Projects is currently presenting “The Guernica Project” (through April 16) by multidisciplinary Indian artist and storyteller Raghava KK. The exhibition features his 2021 work, “Guernica for the Siri-ocene,” a monumental 3.5 x 8 meter-long (11.5 feet by 26 feet) painting that invites spectators to immerse themselves in the world that it creates. It is part of

“The Guernica Project,” a growing series comprising paintings, digital prints and a large selection of NFTs that explores the digital and physical realms, inspired by a dance of references reverting back to Pablo Picasso’s acclaimed 1937 anti-war painting “Guernica” as well as Raghava’s own work.

The show is one of several being staged at Alserkal Avenue this week, many of which merge the worlds of physical art with the rapidly expanding digital realm, all encased within Alserkal Avenue’s multicultural vision.

“Alserkal has grown to become a blueprint for the region, with Alserkal Avenue at the epicenter of the UAE arts scene, housing the most prominent art galleries and institutions featuring both homegrown and international artist rosters,” said Jurkute.

“As the art scene continues to mature, our artistic community here is also evolving and growing,” she added. “We continue to highlight our pioneer galleries while we also welcome new initiatives and artist rosters by new galleries on the block, such as Firetti Contemporary, Zawyeh and Volte Art Projects, all of whom joined Alserkal in the last few years. Collectively they will contribute through their ambitious programs, further strengthening the arts ecosystem at large.” ♦

MARCH 14, 2022

In Bay Area congressional race, parsing differences on Israel

David Canepa and Kevin Mullin are vying to succeed Rep. Jackie Speier, who announced her retirement from Congress in November

By Matthew Kassel

The open-seat race to represent California’s newly drawn 15th Congressional District is increasingly taking shape around two leading Democratic primary candidates whose competing policy objectives typify some of the finer distinctions between the moderate and activist

wings of the party.

On the far-left flank is David Canepa, a 46-year-old San Mateo County supervisor and Squad-aligned progressive who touts his support for such policy goals as Medicare for All, the Green New Deal and what he describes as a “Marshall Plan” for affordable housing.

Meanwhile, Kevin Mullin, a state assemblyman in South San Francisco, is dominating the establishment lane as he racks up endorsements at the federal level from Reps. Anna Eshoo (D-CA), Jared Huffman (D-CA) and Jackie Speier (D-CA), the outgoing representative, who announced in November that she would not

be seeking reelection. Mullin, 51, shies away from the language used by his opponent, arguing in favor of, among other things, “climate resilience” and an “economy for all.”

On foreign policy matters, particularly in the Middle East, the two candidates also part ways along relatively familiar lines, even if the differences are, at first glance, somewhat more difficult to parse.

Mullin, for his part, cast himself as a more traditional “pro-Israel lawmaker” in an interview with *Jewish Insider*, expressing reverence for America’s longstanding relationship with the Jewish state. “This friendship and allyship,” he said, “transcends presidential administrations and governing coalitions.”

The congressional hopeful favors continued U.S. military assistance to Israel guaranteed in a 10-year Memorandum of Understanding between the two countries. He also backs legislation providing Israel with \$1 billion in supplemental funding for its Iron Dome missile-defense system. “These are all crucial elements,” he said, “of maintaining America’s support for Israel.”

Mullin rejected the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement as discriminatory because it singles out the Jewish state and says he will push to fortify America’s economic ties with Israel if he is elected.

In a separate interview, Canepa emphasized what he described as a “firm commitment” to strengthening the “critical relationship” between the U.S. and Israel. But he insisted that “we can’t be afraid to criticize” the Israeli government on the “issue of taking properties and lands” from the Palestinians. “These are tough conversations,” he told JI. “But they have to be had.”

Both candidates endorsed a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But while Canepa argues that Jerusalem must serve as the capital of “both nations,” Mullin does not believe the U.S. should dictate the terms of any future arrangement. Instead, he suggests that American officials can help create the conditions for an outcome that respects “the self-determination of both the Israeli and Palestinian people,” according to a lengthy position paper.

Mullin and Canepa are also broadly in favor of the Biden administration’s renewed

efforts to negotiate a nuclear agreement with Iran, even as Mullin expressed some reservations over “shortcomings” in the original deal. “At the end of the day,” he said, “it’s not about containment or appeasement, it’s about how we prevent a nuclear Iran, for Israel security and for the world’s security.”

“We don’t want to go to war with Iran,” Canepa stressed. “But Congress should have authorization to engage in military operations against Iran if it continues to pursue nuclear activities.”

But in contrast with his opponent, Canepa — who, like Mullin, has never visited Israel — was clearly unversed on a number of basic issues concerning the Middle East.

Asked about his views on BDS, for instance, Canepa indicated that he was unaware of the movement. “You know, BDS, I support BDS,” he said at first. “BDS meaning, can you explain that to me again? I think I know what that is.”

He paused after JI had offered a summary. “I don’t think I’m in support of that,” he said. “Let me get back to you on that one.”

Later in the conversation, he offered a clarification. “I wanted to get back to BDS, which is really, really important,” Canepa told JI. “I do not support BDS. Make no mistake about it. That goes too far for me. It really does.”

While Canepa said he is in favor of additional Iron Dome funding, he was not familiar with the Memorandum of Understanding and asked for an explanation from JI.

“I’m in support of that,” he said, adding, “Anything that we can do to support Israel, we should do that.”

Canepa’s claim is consistent with a position paper, written with the liberal Israel advocacy group J Street, in which he loosely argues that the U.S. should “continue to provide aid to Israel, while also resuming humanitarian and other forms of economic assistance to the Palestinian Authority and to the UN agencies that serve Palestinian refugees.”

In conversation, he expressed support for legislation introduced by Rep. Andy Levin (D-MI) — and supported by J Street — that would place restrictions on U.S. aid to Israel while condemning Israeli settlements.

“Basically, what I would do is probably ally myself with him,” Canepa said of Levin, “and oppose actions that obstruct a two-state solution.”

“There are a lot of people much smarter than me on this, I mean, people who are scholars and academics and people at the State Department,” he said of the security funding. “I would really lean on them as well in terms of decisions and decision-making.”

Laura Birnbaum, J Street’s national political director, said local leaders in the Bay Area “have met with and had productive discussions with” Canepa — as well as Mullin and one other candidate in the race — on such matters.

For his part, Mullin also acknowledges that he is somewhat inexperienced in the Middle East foreign policy realm. But he says he has been studying up in hopes that he will be able to address the issues with some command in the House.

“Part of this process of being a candidate and, if I’m successful, a freshman congressman, is to immerse yourself in the nuances of the situation,” he told JI. “I certainly have my philosophy and I have my grounding — I’ve followed these issues over the years — but not in a policymaking context and not in a way that I’ve actually had to, frankly, articulate.”

In recent months, Mullin has sought guidance from a number of Jewish leaders and pro-Israel advocates in California. Jesse Gabriel, a fellow Democratic assemblyman in Encino who chairs the Jewish Caucus, said he has been encouraged by Mullin’s engagement. “He’s the kind of person who does his homework and really wants to hear what people in the community have to say,” Gabriel told JI. “He’s spending a lot of time to get fluent with these issues and to understand things in detail.”

“He hasn’t had much opportunity to act on foreign affairs in the state legislature, but he has always been strong on BDS and promoting trade between Israel and California,” Sam Lauter, a Jewish community activist in San Francisco, said of Mullin.

Lauter, who serves as a board member of Democratic Majority for Israel and A Wider Bridge, the nonprofit organization that connects LGBTQ communities in the U.S. and Israel, expressed reservations over Canepa’s Middle East foreign policy

approach. “He just doesn’t understand the issue,” said Lauter, noting that Canepa had weighed in on the conflict between Israel and Hamas last May with a message that some local pro-Israel advocates viewed as dismissive of Israeli security concerns as well as the broader dynamics at play in the region.

“Peace for Palestine,” Canepa wrote, concluding his missive with a string of victory hand and Palestinian flag emojis.

In the interview with JI, Mullin said he could not comment on Canepa’s positions. “I just know what my position is, and it’s going to be unequivocal in terms of standing with Israel and honoring the traditions of allyship and friendship and that unshakable bond,” he noted. “To that end, I think part of this process will be further educating myself.”

“What can be done to further those goals?” Mullin said he is now wondering as he makes his first bid for federal office.

He touted his commitment to upholding bipartisan support for Israel in the House, even as he recognizes that such “unanimity” may have “frayed somewhat” during the administration of former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

“We need to do whatever we can to rebuild that strong relationship,” said Mullin, who adds that he was “encouraged” by President Joe Biden’s meeting with the current Israeli prime minister, Naftali Bennett, last summer in the Oval Office. “I think it’s going to be strong regardless, but I want it to be a little more visible.”

The matchup between Mullin and Canepa hasn’t yet drawn national attention, and pro-Israel groups have so far mostly

refrained from weighing in publicly on a race that is largely focused on local concerns such as affordable housing and the ravages of climate change. The updated Bay Area district remains heavily Democratic.

“We have not yet made any endorsement decision,” Birnbaum, of J Street, told JI. “Rep. Speier has been a longtime friend and ally of J Street, and we look forward to continuing to have a strong relationship with the next representative to hold this seat.”

On Monday, Democratic Majority for Israel’s political arm announced it is backing Mullin in a new round of candidate endorsements.

The two other candidates in the four-way primary are Burlingame Councilwoman Emily Beach — who has also spoken with J Street — and Redwood City attorney Andrew Watters, who loaned his campaign \$10,000 but has otherwise raised no money from individual donors, according to the latest filings from the Federal Election Commission.

There is limited publicly available polling on the race, but a recent survey commissioned by the Canepa campaign put the San Mateo County supervisor in the lead with 19% of the vote. Mullin was two points behind at 17%, and Beach came in at 7%. A plurality of voters, 43%, were undecided.

Corey Cook, the executive vice president and provost at St. Mary’s College of California, who specializes in local elections, suggested that it is too early to draw conclusions from the polling.

“The key question is whether the high-profile endorsements for” Mullin “will matter in what appears to be a rough

midterm election for the Democrats,” Cook told JI. “He’s definitely consolidated the party support but this far out it’s hard to discern how much — or if — that will help him.”

Canepa has raised nearly \$430,000, more than any candidate in the race, and entered the new year with just over \$360,000 on hand. Mullin ended the last quarter with \$230,000 in the bank and has pulled in \$245,000, trailing Beach, who has raised just over \$275,000. All three candidates entered the race last November.

Previously, Canepa served as a councilman in Daly City, where he also resides, between 2008 and 2016. He was the town’s mayor in 2014. He says he is running because he wants “to stand up for underserved communities,” including people of color, women and seniors, “to bring the resources they need to succeed in America.”

Prior to joining the Assembly in 2014, Mullin served as a councilman as well as a mayor in his hometown of South San Francisco. He was “moved to run” because of what he criticized as “attacks on our democracy” from “red states across the country who are trying to undermine elections.”

Regardless of the outcome in his own primary, Mullin said he is actively mulling the possibility of visiting Israel this summer as part of what he views as an ongoing effort to learn more about the conflict. “There’s reading newspaper articles,” he told JI, “and then there’s actually being on the ground.” ♦

MARCH 16, 2022

Meet the Israeli working to revive and preserve Morocco’s Jewish past

Nonprofit Kulna offers Israelis and Jewish visitors to Morocco a glimpse into the country’s rich Jewish past

By Ruth Marks Eglash

MARRAKESH, Morocco — With expert ease, Kobi Ifrach navigates the narrow

alleyways of the Mellah, Marrakesh’s old Jewish quarter, ruffling the heads of small children and greeting stall owners

selling tea and spices in the market, as if he’s lived here his entire life. But, despite his Mediterranean complexion

and fluent Moroccan tongue, Ifrach did not grow up here. In fact, he was born and raised thousands of miles away in the small dusty town of Dimona – in Israel.

“All my life, I heard about Morocco and listened to stories about Morocco,” Ifrach, 39, told *Jewish Insider* of his childhood growing up in the southern Israeli development town, which has a sizable Moroccan Jewish immigrant population.

“On Shabbat, on holidays, I would always sit with elderly immigrants and hear how much they missed Morocco and the special connection they had with their Muslim neighbors there,” he added.

A child of immigrants – his father arrived in Israel from Fez, his mother from Marrakesh – who grew up speaking Moroccan Arabic, Ifrach said he always felt like somewhat of an outsider in Israel.

“Even though I grew up in Dimona, lived in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and other places in Israel, there was always something in my culture, in my traditions that made me feel different,” he continued, explaining what prompted him to first visit Morocco in a pre-army trip at 18. Ifrach would return to the North African country multiple times while studying Islamic studies at Ben-Gurion University in Beersheva. He eventually obtained Moroccan citizenship and moved to his mother’s hometown permanently approximately five years ago.

“When I arrived here, I felt like I had returned home,” stated Ifrach, who went on to create, with a partner, Kulna, a nonprofit organization aimed at preserving and promoting Jewish Moroccan heritage in both Morocco and Israel.

Among the projects in his new home country, Ifrach has helped to build a museum dedicated to the Jews of Marrakesh, renovate the Jewish cemetery, and create study programs for young Israelis interested in learning about Moroccan Jewish life and culture. In all, he has brought more than 1,000 people to the Arab country to experience, in person, Morocco’s 2,000-year-old Jewish history.

“Morocco is the land of longing, not only for Jews of Moroccan heritage but for all Jews, regardless of their roots, and it’s the only place where you can touch and feel Jewish history that has been here for

thousands of years,” he told JI during a recent interview at the Leaders of Tomorrow Summit, organized by Tel Aviv-based NGO Israel-is and the Mimouna Association, a Moroccan nonprofit that promotes and preserves Jewish heritage in Morocco.

Archeological discoveries suggest that Jews have had a permanent presence in this North African nation for more than 2,000 years, with the community greatly swelling in the 15th century with the arrival of Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal. Today, while the community has shrunk from an estimated 250,000 to 300,000 in the mid-20th century to only about 2,000 – most fleeing following waves of antisemitism after Israel’s creation – those still living in the country remain openly and actively Jewish.

“Morocco is a special place because it is the only Arab country, maybe even the only country in the world, that has had an active Jewish community for so long,” David Biton, head of Jewish studies at Ono Academic College in Israel and an expert on the Moroccan Jewish community, told JI. “The community’s influence on the economy and the culture is amazing given its size, and although there are other Muslim countries such as Turkey and Iran that have Jewish communities, there is no Arab country like this.”

Biton, who also serves as Kulna’s chairman, explained that Moroccans are proud of their Diaspora communities, including Jews in Israel and all over the world. Unlike other Arab countries, Jews always held a special status in Morocco and even after their departure for Israel, were able to return and visit the country regardless of regional tensions or politics.

In Israel, Biton pointed out, Moroccan immigrants were always proud of their identity, which many were able to preserve in isolated and far-flung towns such as Dimona, nearby Yeruham and in the Galilee and clung to as they faced discrimination in Israel. In recent years, Moroccan culture, including the annual Mimouna celebration following Pessach, has become far more mainstream in Israel.

“They arrived with small suitcases filled with a rich culture,” he noted. “What Kobi is doing now is bringing back to Israel more of that culture, whatever did not fit in our

parents’ and grandparents’ suitcases back then... He is taking the living memories, the living institutions and preserving them for the next generation.”

Ifrach said that it was during a visit to Morocco about seven years ago when he was struck by the fact that the community, made up mainly of elderly Jews today, was slowly disappearing.

“I realized that soon there would be no one left to tell their stories, to tell the story of the Jewish community that once thrived here,” he said, adding, “There was almost no minyan in the synagogue and the cemetery was not being looked after.”

He decided to begin documenting the stories of the Jews here in film and in writing, material that he used to form the basis of the museum that now fills the classrooms of the former Hebrew school surrounding the Slat al-Azama Synagogue in the Jewish quarter. He also brought a crew of volunteers from Israel to clean up the Miâara Jewish cemetery, the largest in the country.

It was in the ancient cemetery that Ifrach found validation for what he says is his calling.

“I had been living here and working as a volunteer for three years and could not decide if I should stay or go home,” Ifrach described. “I was 33 years old; all my friends were getting married and settling down in Israel, what was I still doing alone in Morocco?”

Ifrach, an observant Jew, decided to pay a visit to one of the many tzadikim, or holy sages, buried in the cemetery — Rabbi Pinchas Hacoen.

“I asked him to give me a sign about whether I should stay or return to Israel,” he recalled of the experience. “Afterwards, I went to the synagogue and by chance bumped into his grandson. I told him about my dilemma and that I was reluctantly getting ready to go back to Israel. Suddenly, he took me to his grandfather’s empty house and gave me the keys, saying I could stay there until I sorted myself out. I’m still living there today.”

Seven years later, Ifrach is married. His wife, Kimmy – whom he met on one of the trips to Morocco that he organized – and their newborn daughter recently joined him in Marrakesh. The two are working to set up “Dar Abraham,” a guest house and

community center he hopes will serve Kulna Morocco's activities, including teaching Hebrew to the local non-Jewish population and offering cultural, educational and volunteering activities for tourists.

And while Ifrach began his work long before the governments of Israel and Morocco agreed to establish full and open

ties in December 2020, he said that the normalizing of relations has certainly boosted Kulna's activities in both countries.

The new arrangement, he said, "is helping me to build these bridges; if, in the past, there were suspicions, now everything – the exchange of ideas and culture – is flowing and my goal is to bring as many

young Israelis and Jews to Morocco as possible."

"I want to tell Morocco's story," Ifrach concluded. "Morocco is a country with so many ethnicities and they all live together under one identity, under one leader – I think Israelis and Jews everywhere can really learn a lot from here too." ♦

MARCH 14, 2022

Only one Jew remains in Yemen, U.N. says

A report on the treatment of religious minorities in conflict zones described a harrowing environment for Jews and Baha'is in Yemen

By Gabby Deutch

A lone Jewish person remains in Yemen, down from seven a month ago, according to a new United Nations report about the treatment of religious minorities in conflict zones.

The report, which was published by the U.N. special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, described the treatment of religious minorities around the world. "In recent years, the rise in situations of conflict and insecurity has impacted communities of every religion or belief system, subverting their enjoyment of fundamental human rights, including freedom of religion or belief," the report noted.

Although the report did not name the one Jewish individual remaining in Yemen, "that Jew is undoubtedly Levi Salem Musa Marhabi, who has been illegally imprisoned and tortured by Ansar Allah since 2016," said Jason Guberman, executive director of the American Sephardi Federation, referring to the Houthi rebel forces by their official name, Ansar Allah.

Yemen's Houthis have imprisoned Marhabi since 2016, despite court orders demanding his release. American officials have also issued calls for Marhabi's release. "We understand the Houthis continue to detain Mr. Marhabi despite our calls, and those by the international community, for his release," a State Department spokesperson told Jewish Insider last month.

According to the U.N. report, the Houthis

"coerced Jewish and Baha'i communities into leaving — blackmailing them by arbitrarily detaining religious leaders, influencers and community members." The goal of such actions, Ahmed Shaheed, the special rapporteur, wrote, is "to weaken the community's morale, resilience, or cohesion."

As a result of the Houthis' treatment of religious minorities, "only one Jew reportedly remain[s] in the country, from a population of approximately between 1,500-2,000 Jews in 2016."

In its discussion of Yemen, the report also called out the Houthis' treatment of the country's Baha'i population. "A Houthi leader in Yemen has described Baha'is as Israeli spies, effectively making the community targets for harm," the report stated.

The U.N. report described instances of human rights violations against religious minorities in conflict zones around the world, including Myanmar's perpetration of genocide against the Rohingya and the targeting of Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses by armed separatist groups in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine.

"We commend his efforts and support[the special rapporteur's] references to Houthi violations against religious minorities," said Abdullah Ali Fadhel Al-Saadi, Yemen's permanent representative to the United Nations, at a Thursday meeting of the U.N. Human Rights Council. "Like all

other extremist terrorist organizations, the Houthis have undertaken violations of the rights of Jewish and Bahai societies. The Houthis have expelled many minorities, blackmailed them, and have arbitrarily detained their leaders and seized their work and properties." ♦

Israel 'shouldn't exist as a Jewish state,' Amnesty USA director tells Democratic group

Paul O'Brien's comments follow an Amnesty International report accusing the Jewish state of committing apartheid

By Gabby Deutch

Following Amnesty International's recent report that accused Israel of "apartheid" in its treatment of Palestinians, the group's USA director appeared to go a step further on Wednesday, suggesting to a Woman's National Democratic Club audience that the bulk of American Jews do not want Israel to be a Jewish state, but rather "a safe Jewish space" based on "core Jewish values."

Paul O'Brien said one of Amnesty's goals in publishing the report, which was roundly criticized by Israeli and American officials, is to "collectively change the conversation" on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "It needs to start first and foremost with the Jewish community," O'Brien, who is not Jewish, said.

The Amnesty official rejected a 2020 survey conducted by the Ruderman Family Foundation that found that eight in 10 Jewish Americans identify as "pro-Israel," and two-thirds feel emotionally "attached" or "very attached" to the Jewish state.

"I actually don't believe that to be true," O'Brien said regarding those figures. "I believe my gut tells me that what Jewish people in this country want is to know that there's a sanctuary that is a safe and sustainable place that the Jews, the Jewish people can call home."

Rather than a Jewish state, American Jews want "a safe Jewish space," O'Brien continued. "I think they can be convinced over time that the key to sustainability is to adhere to what I see as core Jewish values, which are to be principled and fair and just in creating that space." (The pro-Israel community rejects this "one-state solution" argument as a cover for the dissolution of a Jewish state.)

On the question of Israel's right to exist,

O'Brien seemed to be splitting hairs.

Israel "shouldn't exist as a Jewish state," O'Brien told some 20 in-person and 30 virtual attendees at the Wednesday lunch event, before adding "Amnesty takes no political views on any question, including the right of the State of Israel to survive."

In Amnesty's report, the international human rights organization — while deeply critical of the Jewish state — acknowledges that Israel exists. "The organization engages with the reality of the existence of the State of Israel," said the report. But O'Brien's comments undercut that assertion and appear to indicate that Amnesty believes the Jewish state does not have a right to exist.

"The right of the people to self-determination and to be protected is without a doubt something that we believe in, and I personally believe that," said O'Brien. But "we are opposed to the idea — and this, I think, is an existential part of the debate — that Israel should be preserved as a state for the Jewish people."

Amanda Berman, executive director of the pro-Israel group Zioness, told *Jewish Insider* after the event that she found it "shocking" that Amnesty's strategy in changing the American conversation around Israel "is to tokenize Jews to be the face of the campaign."

"It is disturbing that Amnesty, which ostensibly exists to advance global human rights, could so casually deny the inalienable human rights of safety and sovereignty to a nation as persecuted as the Jewish people," Berman added.

The Amnesty International report has faced criticism from the Biden administration and senior congressional Democrats, as well as the Israeli government and major American Jewish organizations.

"We reject the view that Israel's actions

constitute apartheid," State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters in February. "We think that it is important as the world's only Jewish state that the Jewish people must not be denied their right to self-determination, and we must ensure there isn't a double standard being applied." House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) called the report "a gross mischaracterization of Israel, its history, and its values."

O'Brien sought to assign blame for Democrats' criticism of the report. Had Amnesty begun meeting with members of Congress sooner, "we might not have ended up in almost every single congressional office that we went to having a meeting with that congressional office after they had met with AIPAC," noted O'Brien. "The vast majority [of members of Congress with whom he met] were clear that whatever they were going to talk about with us privately, they were not interested in publicly supporting our report."

The event is the first in a series hosted by the Democratic group that will explore "Palestine past, present and future." An employee of the Woman's National Democratic Club noted that a staff member from the Israeli embassy will likely address the club next month to respond to Amnesty's report.

The Woman's National Democratic Club is a membership organization that hosts events, advocacy campaigns and get-out-the-vote drives for Democratic women in the Washington area. The organization, which meets in a large brownstone clubhouse near Dupont Circle, often hosts authors on topics such as women's history, Black culture in Washington and foreign affairs. This week's event was not the first on Israel; last month, author Andrew Lawler spoke about his book "Under Jerusalem: The Buried History of

the World's Most Contested City.”

“Today’s a perfect example of allowing us to hear diverse opinions about many

different issues,” said Karyl Cafiero, the club’s director of programming. ♦

MARCH 14, 2022

25 Jewish House Dems condemn Amnesty director’s ‘alarming’ and ‘antisemitic’ comments

25 Jewish House Dems condemn Amnesty director’s ‘alarming’ and ‘antisemitic’ comments

By Marc Rod

All 25 Jewish House Democrats came together to issue a rare joint statement on Monday condemning Amnesty International USA Executive Director Paul O’Brien’s comments that American Jews do not want Israel to be a Jewish state.

“We are in full agreement that Mr. O’Brien’s patronizing attempt to speak on behalf of the American Jewish community is alarming and deeply offensive. He has added his name to the list of those who, across centuries, have tried to deny and usurp the Jewish people’s independent agency,” the statement reads. “We stand united in condemning this and any antisemitic attempt to deny the Jewish people control of their own destiny.”

O’Brien made the comments, first reported by Jewish Insider, at a meeting

of the Women’s National Democratic Club last week. He said at the meeting that his “gut” tells him that “what Jewish people in this country want is to know that there’s a sanctuary that is a safe and sustainable place that the Jews, the Jewish people, can call home,” rather than a Jewish state.

The House members acknowledge in the statement that they represent a range of views on Israel-related issues, and several are vocally critical of Israel’s policies toward the Palestinians.

The statement further notes that “a number of members condemned” Amnesty International’s report accusing Israel of apartheid “as delegitimizing of the Jewish people’s right to self-determination and undermining of the prospects for a two-state solution.”

The statement calls O’Brien’s comments

“a new, very disturbing step” and accuses him of “purporting to speak for the entire Jewish community on Israel.”

The Jewish House Democrats who signed onto the statement are Reps. Jake Auchincloss (D-MA), Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR), David Cicilline (D-RI), Steve Cohen (D-TN), Ted Deutch (D-FL), Lois Frankel (D-FL), Josh Gottheimer (D-NJ), Sara Jacobs (D-CA), Mike Levin (D-CA), Andy Levin (D-MI), Alan Lowenthal (D-CA), Elaine Luria (D-VA), Kathy Manning (D-NC), Jerry Nadler (D-NY), Dean Phillips (D-MN), Jamie Raskin (D-MD), Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), Adam Schiff (D-CA), Brad Schneider (D-IL), Kim Schrier (D-WA), Brad Sherman (D-CA), Elissa Slotkin (D-MI), Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), Susan Wild (D-PA) and John Yarmuth (D-KY). ♦

MARCH 16, 2022

Eleven Jewish House Dems: Amnesty director’s full remarks ‘even more troubling’

O’Brien’s remarks, coupled with a recent report from the organization, display a ‘continued dangerous degree of bias and denial of Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state,’ the legislators warned

By Marc Rod

Day after all 25 Jewish House Democrats issued a statement condemning Amnesty International USA Director Paul O’Brien’s comments on American Jews

and Israel, eleven of those members wrote to the organization’s international chief on Tuesday expressing concern that O’Brien’s full comments were “even more troubling” than the remarks

initially reported by *Jewish Insider*.

In an event last week, O’Brien claimed that American Jews do not support Israel’s existence as a Jewish state — a statement that the original group of legislators

described as “alarming” and “antisemitic.”

JI published the full audio and a partial transcript of O’Brien’s remarks to the Woman’s National Democratic Club.

“Mr. O’Brien’s comments, coupled with Amnesty International’s report released last month, appear to be part of Amnesty International’s continued dangerous degree of bias and denial of Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state,” the letter to Amnesty International’s Secretary General Agnès Callamard reads, referring to a recent report from the NGO that accused Israel of apartheid. “Amnesty International cannot credibly advance human rights around the globe while simultaneously denying the only Jewish state their right to self-

determination.”

The letter was organized by Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), who was joined by Reps. Brad Schneider (D-IL), Kathy Manning (D-NC), Josh Gottheimer (D-NJ), Elaine Luria (D-VA), Kim Schrier (D-WA), Jake Auchincloss (D-MA), Brad Sherman (D-CA), Mike Levin (D-CA), Lois Frankel (D-FL) and Dean Phillips (D-MN).

“Mr. O’Brien’s comments, if not denounced, lay bare the real purpose of Amnesty International’s report on Israel,” the letter continues. “It is not an attempt to give a fair analysis of Israel and its policies, nor an effort to support the aspirations of both the Arab and Jewish people. Rather, it is a tacit attempt to delegitimize and

ultimately destroy Israel as the only Jewish state in the world.”

The signatories call on Amnesty International to clarify whether it “seeks to advance peace for both Israelis and Palestinians,” “whether or not it accepts Israel as a democratic, Jewish state” and whether it supports a two-state solution.

Amnesty’s spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment on whether O’Brien’s remarks reflect the organization’s views.

The letter further accuses Amnesty’s report and O’Brien’s comments of being counterproductive to the cause of advancing a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. ♦

MARCH 16, 2022

Will the Biden administration allow Congress to re-view the new Iran deal?

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair Bob Menendez said he plans to hold hearings on the deal regardless of whether it meets the terms of INARA

By Marc Rod

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair Bob Menendez (D-NJ) said on Tuesday that he wants the Biden administration to submit any new nuclear agreement with Iran for congressional review “if it does meet the obligations” of the 2015 Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA) — but said he plans to hold hearings even if it does not.

The legislation mandates a review period — during which time no sanctions can be removed — for Congress to review any nuclear deal with Iran.

“I will check to see what the agreement is and look to apply INARA,” Menendez told reporters on Tuesday. “If it doesn’t meet the obligations under INARA, then no. Although I still would want to have hearings. If it does meet the obligations of INARA, then yes, it should be pursued under INARA.”

The debate over the applicability of INARA has taken on increasing prominence in recent days as talks on Iran’s nuclear program in Vienna progress, and has been

listed as a top issue by House and Senate Republicans, as well as a bipartisan House group — including a dozen Democrats — that recently expressed concerns about the negotiations to the Biden administration.

A congressional staffer familiar with the deliberations said that the administration has confirmed both publicly and privately that they will submit the deal to Congress for INARA review if a deal is finalized.

Menendez said he would “have to see what the specific agreement is” before deciding whether INARA applies, and would not speculate about what sort of deal could be exempt. The language of the legislation is broad, applying to “an agreement with Iran relating to the nuclear program of Iran.”

But he said a direct reentry into the deal as it previously existed is no longer possible, given that new sanctions have been imposed since then, Iran has advanced beyond the limits of the original deal and Iran has blocked International Atomic Energy Agency inspections of its sites.

“I cannot imagine a simple, straight

reentry,” Menendez said.

The Biden administration declined to specifically guarantee in a statement to JI on Tuesday that it will submit any agreement to Congress under INARA.

A State Department spokesperson told JI, “the administration will carefully consider the facts and circumstances of any U.S. return to the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action] to determine the legal implications, including those under INARA. We are committed to ensuring the requirements of INARA are satisfied.”

The spokesperson also said that administration officials have been in touch with lawmakers and their staffs about the issue and that lead U.S. negotiator in the Vienna talks, Rob Malley, “remains deeply committed to close engagement with Congress.”

Menendez said he hasn’t “found [Malley’s] briefings to be very significant or insightful.”

Although a majority of House and Senate members — including a handful of

Democrats — appear to oppose the deal as it has been outlined publicly, it is unlikely that opponents of the deal would be able to muster the full 60 votes in the Senate to block it from going into effect, much less the two-thirds of each chamber necessary to override a presidential veto.

“At the end of the day, if there is an agreement, it’s not going to be blocked,” Dennis Ross, the William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy who has served in multiple Democratic and Republican presidential administrations, told JI.

Ross said he heard initially that the administration was planning to argue that it is only reentering the 2015 agreement, which was already reviewed by Congress, making a new review unnecessary. But he has “heard conflicting things since then.”

The administration now may believe that “rather than in effect be seen as stonewalling the Congress, it makes more sense to go ahead and allow it to be reviewed again,” he explained.

“The only issue” with submitting the deal under INARA “is that you’re kind of conceding that this is an agreement that’s actually different than the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action],” contrary to the administration’s position, Ross continued. “If you concede that point then you’re already acknowledging that this is something different than what you’ve said it is.”

Joel Rubin, a deputy assistant secretary

of state for legislative affairs in the Obama administration, told JI he has heard that INARA review is predicated on the contents of the final deal — which has not yet been completed — and that if it is the same as the original JCPOA the administration sees another review as unnecessary.

David Makovsky, the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute said that he thinks it is “inevitable that there will [be] Hill hearings” if a deal is reached, “given the gravity and consequences of returning to the JCPOA.”

Some skeptics of the original deal insist that the administration is seeking to dodge congressional scrutiny. Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) claimed at a press conference last week that “there’s some creative lawyers at the State Department that are trying to find ways around that law.”

Rich Goldberg, a senior advisor at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) and a former National Security Council and Hill staffer who co-hosts JI’s “Limited Liability Podcast,” said that the administration’s “very strict, disciplined messaging” that the deal is a reentry into the 2015 agreement rather than a new agreement leads him to believe that they are “preparing legal arguments to avoid submitting this agreement to the Congress.”

Blaise Misztal, the vice president for policy at the Jewish Institute for National Security of America, said he “absolutely” thinks the administration will try to dodge Congress both to avoid the “dirty laundry”

of the deal being aired and vetted as well as to protect congressional Democrats from having to take tough votes on the deal.

He pointed to Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) as potentially of particular concern — Schumer voted against the deal, but is now in Democratic leadership and it “would look particularly bad for him to break with the president but might not want to be on the record supporting the deal either.”

Matthew Zweig, a senior fellow at FDD and longtime former staffer on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said it’s difficult to predict how the administration will proceed, but said that the administration would likely prefer to avoid a situation in which opponents of the deal can say that a majority of Congress opposed it, as happened previously.

Should the administration seek to sidestep congressional review, there’s “not a whole heck of a lot” Congress can do to stop the agreement from going into effect, Misztal said.

Members of Congress could sue the administration, a longer process that would not stop initial implementation of the deal and that is not guaranteed to be successful, Misztal suggested. They could also seek to pass legislation reimposing sanctions the administration lifts or compelling the administration to take other actions in the event of Iranian violations of the deal. ♦