

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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The American diplomat whose latest mission is tackling global antisemitism

As one of several non-Jewish diplomats on the State Department team fighting global antisemitism, Ludovic Hood views his task as an American imperative

By Gabby Deutch

Ludovic Hood is one of the lucky ones at the State Department: He has an office with a window. Tokens of his 16 years as a Foreign Service officer cover the walls — two Superior Honor awards and one Meritorious Honor award. (Like many things in the sprawling bureaucracy of the State Department, the two awards may sound exactly the same but are, in fact, different.) A family photo, in a “#1 Dad” frame, is displayed prominently.

A small bookshelf behind his desk clues visitors into Hood's latest assignment as a senior advisor in the Office of the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism. There is a selection of titles from his recent self-directed crash course in antisemitism, among them his new boss' 2019 book, *Antisemitism: Here and Now*. He'd been reading it while the book's author, Deborah Lipstadt, was enmeshed in Capitol Hill chaos across town. Her confirmation to be the Biden administration's Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism was delayed for months after Republicans on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee took issue with some of her past

tweets.

Hood's career has taken him around the world, with stops in Paris, Bahrain and Qatar. But his first year-plus in this role was spent in Foggy Bottom, hunched over books, diving deep on the history of the world's oldest hatred, “whether it's the centuries-long misery that most Jewish communities in Eastern Europe suffered through, culminating in the Holocaust,” Hood told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview, “or what Sephardic communities dealt with, notably in the 20th century, when over a million of them [were] kicked out of half a dozen or so Arab countries with no talk of return.”

Tall and slender, dressed in a fitted suit with an Hermès tie decorated in cartoon dogs and cats, Hood, 48, looks more like a Wall Street trader — perhaps a result of an early but short-lived career in finance — than a mid-level bureaucrat.

Exceptionally easy to talk to, Hood is a diplomat's diplomat, skilled at easily making connections and building sources among locals and expats alike, say those who have worked with him. During his first overseas assignment in Kuwait, as a junior officer, he “had a Rolodex that was probably second

only to mine, as the ambassador. That's very unusual,” said Deborah K. Jones, who was the U.S. ambassador in Kuwait from 2008-2011.

Like Hood's overseas postings, his latest role has opened his eyes to new issues and diverse perspectives: Unlike Lipstadt, the noted Holocaust historian who was confirmed by the Senate last week as the special envoy, Hood is not Jewish. Many of the officers now working in the antisemitism office are not. Deputy special envoy Aaron Keyak told *JI* that this diversity is a crucial aspect of what makes American diplomacy unique.

“I don't think it's surprising that there's a wide range of folks on our team from various backgrounds, various religions, some who've dealt with these issues for years and decades, others who have a more diverse range of issues that they've worked in government on,” said Keyak, a political appointee who led Jewish outreach for Joe Biden's presidential campaign in 2020. “It's not about being one religion or another, or having one particular set of experiences or background. It's about serving your government.”

That translates to people of diverse religious backgrounds working to fight antisemitism and to advocate for religious freedom worldwide. It's also straight people working alongside members of the LGBTQ community to advance gay rights, and men standing by their female colleagues in the fight for gender equality.

But what does an antisemitism-fighting diplomat actually do? While Lipstadt's nomination moved slowly through the Senate, Hood saw his team grow from a skeletal one-and-a-half full-time employees — a result of the transition from the Trump to the Biden administration, when former Special Envoy Elan Carr and his team left the office — to roughly 10 staffers.

Last year, the majority of religiously motivated hate crimes in the U.S. were directed at Jews, according to data from the FBI. But the purview of the antisemitism office is global, not domestic. That means talking to foreign diplomats and officials to help them understand the problem of antisemitism and how it manifests differently in each country. It's also building relationships with Jewish leaders from across the wide spectrum of the Jewish community in the U.S. and globally, to hear their concerns and build partnerships.

Hood's career, and his position in the antisemitism office, provide a window into a policy team that is roundly praised by the U.S. Jewish community but whose work — the day-to-day of how combating antisemitism fits into American diplomacy — is not widely understood.

"We are building on a lot of what the [U.S. government] has been doing year-in, year-out, almost regardless of administration," Hood explained. "We've always had this focus on religious freedom and human rights that very few other superpowers or powers have in human history."

After eight months of delays, the speed of Lipstadt's final confirmation last week surprised many observers: She was voted out of committee one day and then approved unanimously by the Senate the following night.

The January hostage crisis at a Colleyville, Texas, synagogue, coupled with

Republican senators' response to Lipstadt's tweets, had sparked outrage and advocacy campaigns from all corners of the U.S. Jewish community. For months, Jewish leaders urged senators to give Lipstadt a vote, arguing that her confirmation was essential for Washington's fight against antisemitism.

"She's going to bring a certain expertise and way of communicating on these issues unlike anyone else," said Keyak. "She also brings a certain gravitas and standing to the office and I think will catapult our work to an even higher level when dealing with these important issues internationally."

While Lipstadt's nomination stalled, her now-colleagues have been laying the foundation for the work she will oversee. The career diplomats on the team have been "executing on the priorities of the government that American voters have elected," said Keyak. Hood, who has served under four presidents since joining the Foreign Service in 2006, understands that directive.

His interest in diplomacy dates back to a short-lived event many Americans have probably never heard of: the 1982 Falklands War, a brief and violent colonial dispute between the United Kingdom and Argentina over two small islands in the South Atlantic.

Born and raised in the U.K., he came to the United States as a teenager to attend boarding school. "I was 9 or 10 years old in England, and I was unduly or preposterously intrigued by the seemingly quixotic endeavor to take back these islands on the other side of the world," Hood recalled. He ended up staying and becoming a citizen, ultimately so taken with the country that he joined the Foreign Service as an Arabic language specialist.

A decade and a half later, he continues to put those language skills to use. Behind his desk, an old map of "Persia and Arabia" hangs next to his books, alerting visitors to Hood's portfolio on the antisemitism beat.

He is focused on working with Arab countries on education around antisemitism, Judaism and the Holocaust. In a region that has been transformed by the Abraham Accords, the Middle East is now surprisingly fertile territory for the type of work happening in the antisemitism office. In January, Egypt hosted its first-ever official

International Holocaust Remembrance Day event, and a similar commemoration took place in Abu Dhabi. The result is an optimism that is newly present in many conversations about antisemitism in the Middle East, an ironic inversion as the problem has only grown more entrenched in Europe.

"I certainly get the feeling that this administration at the highest levels has been quite clear, too, that openings have been generated or presented by the Abraham Accords that allow for discussions about issues my office cares about in ways that were unthinkable up until a couple years ago," said Hood.

Hood has a particularly personal understanding of those changes. More than a decade ago, he was a political officer serving in Bahrain during the Arab Spring. He and his family had to leave the country quickly due to antisemitic threats directed at him and his wife following a diplomatic controversy.

He was working on human rights issues, a thorny matter in Bahrain at the time. U.S. policy in the country has historically had to "balance the realities of a very important strategic ally" — a major American military base is located in Manama, the Bahraini capital — "with a domestic political situation, partly relating to the country's demographics, that has, in sort of spikes over the decades, resulted in some concerns from the human rights community, and occasionally from the U.S. government itself," explained Hood.

Following uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, widespread anti-government protests broke out in Bahrain in early 2011. "I was the one specifically tasked with outreach to not only some of the human rights defenders themselves, but also to the main Shi'a opposition party," recalled Hood. He left the U.S. Embassy one day to bring the protesters doughnuts, an ill-fated gesture of support that led to his untimely departure from the country.

Soon after, Hood began to face a campaign of vitriolic harassment from state-sanctioned newspapers and a website that appeared to be affiliated with the Bahraini government. The website, called Bahrain Forums, accused the U.S. Embassy of fostering the protests — specifically, "a

person of Jewish origin named Ludovic Hood,” *The Washington Post* reported at the time. The Bahrain Forums post called for “honest people to avenge” Hood’s role in the protests, and mentioned his “Jewish wife, Alisa Newman,” with photos from their wedding ceremony.

The situation prompted him, his wife and their two young daughters to quickly leave the country. “It wasn’t a normal departure. I had to have a lot of extra security,” Hood told JI. He wrote a message to friends explaining the sudden departure and why he could not say many goodbyes: “Given recent developments affecting the Embassy, it was prudent for me to keep a low profile during my final weeks in Bahrain.”

The website that promoted the most problematic and antisemitic content was believed to be affiliated with the Bahraini royal family, *McClatchy* reported at the time. That Hood now counts Bahrain’s ambassador to Washington as a friend demonstrates how much has changed in the Middle East in the past decade.

Hood met Ambassador Abdulla Bin Rashid Al Khalifa when he was serving as a detail on former Vice President Mike Pence’s national security council — State Department lingo for when a Foreign Service officer leaves Foggy Bottom to work elsewhere in Washington, usually in the White House or on Capitol Hill. Hood advised Pence on Middle East policy from 2019 to 2021, and stayed for a few months on Vice President Kamala Harris’ team early last year.

“Religious freedom was one of the issues in which the former vice president gave priority to, so we naturally worked with Ludo on this issue. He continues to play a role with this administration and the office of antisemitism,” Al Khalifa told JI. “That particular office, we have always had a very good relationship for many years.” Al Khalifa said he “didn’t work with Ludo when he was in Bahrain” and was unfamiliar with the details of Hood’s departure from the country.

Before the Abraham Accords, “you could have a very vague talk about interfaith dialogue, but you almost couldn’t bring Jews into the mix,” said Hood, referring to how antisemitism was previously discussed with Washington’s allies in the Persian

Gulf. “There’s a shift, arguably a paradigm shift underway, and that means that we can be talking to these governments about combating antisemitism in a way that simply was in no way viable a couple years ago.”

Hood is no Pollyanna; his experience in Bahrain made sure of that. There remains a great deal of work in translating the government-level excitement about the Abraham Accords to the citizen level in Bahrain and the other countries that now have ties with Israel. And he covers all the countries in the region, not just the ones that normalized relations with Israel.

“There was a huge flap in Kuwait City late last year when our ambassador tweeted Hanukkah greetings. It was like a mini national scandal,” Hood pointed out. Kuwait, which has a large Palestinian population, is particularly hostile to Israel, and Hood predicted the Gulf nation would be the last to forge a relationship with Israel. There are Jewish expats in the country, he said, “but they keep it to themselves the way my wife and daughters did.”

Hood, who was raised in the Church of England, is not especially religious. But his family follows a lot of Jewish traditions, “which I love, and I wish we did more of it.”

When living abroad, Hood’s wife always gathered the other Jews scattered around each Arab capital for holiday meals. When they lived in Qatar, from 2016 to 2019, the couple arranged a Passover Seder in the desert for around 50 people.

“I think having served in the Middle East and on Middle East issues, and with a Jewish wife and daughters who have lived with me in three conservative Muslim majority countries, has all contributed to how I think about these issues,” noted Hood.

As a diplomat, Hood has a reputation as an effective communicator and clear-eyed policy practitioner. After 16 years in the Foreign Service, his patience for following the process, however slow-moving it is, has diminished. He is adept at navigating that process and sometimes pushing its boundaries.

“Ludo is not the typical Foreign Service officer,” Keyak noted.

The number of “special envoys” in Foggy Bottom has proliferated in recent years, leading to confusion among some rank-and-file State Department staffers about where their issue fits within the department’s organizational structure. Each team at State must work to elevate its issue and make sure that U.S. diplomats around the world have an understanding of why the issue matters and how it fits within Washington’s broader foreign policy.

“Working with [Hood], he has a great understanding of how to navigate the system, the way things work at the State Department, the way things work at our embassies and foreign embassies,” added Keyak. “He knows the right moments to push and pull himself and the right moments for me to weigh in, or the right moments for me to gain support from someone higher up to push our priorities.”

That’s what got Hood the job working for Pence, according to a former colleague. “We were definitely looking for people that were not just a mere paper-pusher, for lack of a better term, someone who can analytically approach problems... action-oriented people, right, that actually have ideas,” said Steve Pinkos, who served as Pence’s deputy national security advisor. “I think that that’s why [Hood] succeeded in the NSC environment, because it’s very action-oriented.”

A public servant with strong convictions, Hood is used to keeping those opinions to himself. But last month, a couple of weeks after Russian President Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine, Hood took the unusual step of penning a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed urging NATO to send troops to Western Ukraine — an escalatory step that Washington and NATO have so far avoided.

“The more that I have served Uncle Sam, the more I’ve come up with my own views about which facets of foreign policy ultimately matter on the ground, and to the people in those countries, and above all to the U.S. national interest,” said Hood. One area that has consistently frustrated him is Washington’s response to Bashar al-Assad’s brutal response to protests in Syria.

“Vis-a-vis Syria, I felt very, very strongly about a certain U.S. responsibility to be more involved, and I think quite a few of us did,” he explained. “But ultimately, we serve the

government. We have sworn an oath. We do our best to present the positions of the current administration.”

This sadness about the fate of Syria, and the underwhelming global response to it, color Hood’s views on Israel, too, and the world’s obsession with it.

“I just could never understand why there weren’t protests in any European capitals about what Russia and Iran and the Assad regime were doing in Idlib or other parts of Syria for months, whereas any flare-up in the so-called Holy Land would lead to large-scale protests,” said Hood, rolling his eyes.

Doing this job, and now following antisemitic trends closely — he regularly checks the depressing, never-ending stream of antisemitic hate on Twitter and other social networks — “has forced me to think, why is there such disproportionate focus on Israel by the human rights community, by a lot of mainstream political parties in Europe and a growing number of activist student bodies,” Hood said. “It’s really hard not to reach a conclusion that antisemitism in various forms underpins that.”

This isn’t just Hood’s view. It’s a position that has been echoed by Secretary of State Tony Blinken and other high-level Biden administration officials. After the U.S. rejoined the United Nations Human Rights Council last year, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. ambassador to the U.N., said that the U.S. “will oppose the Council’s disproportionate attention on Israel, which includes the Council’s only standing agenda item targeting a single country.”

One priority for the antisemitism office, in coordination with State’s Bureau of International Organization Affairs, is the U.N.’s Commission of Inquiry into Israel’s human rights violations. The commission, formed in the wake of last May’s fighting between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, is expected to release its first report this summer.

“It’s the only commission of inquiry in the council’s history that is open-ended, never-ending [and] so well-funded. This and the last administration are very opposed to it, every facet of it almost,” said Hood. “We’ve now had both Amnesty and Human Rights Watch use the word ‘apartheid’ [in reference to Israel]. I can’t speculate what the commission may find, but it wouldn’t be surprising if they have similar conclusions, and obviously the U.S. government would not agree with that.”

At times, the priorities of the antisemitism office closely track with those of major Jewish organizations like the American Jewish Committee or The Jewish Federations of North America, both of which urged supporters to advocate for Lipstadt’s confirmation. But at the end of the day, this office has something no nonprofit ever will — the imprimatur of the entirety of the U.S. government, a striking contrast from past eras when State’s own diplomats were sometimes believed to harbor antisemitic attitudes themselves.

Most famously, in World War II, the State Department took an aggressive stance on immigration and Jewish refugees fleeing

Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. Assistant Secretary of State Samuel Breckinridge Long led the charge against admitting any significant number of refugees, and he lied to Congress about the number of refugees Washington had admitted. James Baker, who served as Secretary of State under President George H.W. Bush, himself clashed with pro-Israel activists in the U.S. Jewish community.

Problems remain — a swastika was etched into a State Department elevator last year, and Jewish staffers have protested the continued employment of a Foreign Service officer who writes an antisemitic blog — but they no longer come from the top. At the top is a government that has put the global fight against antisemitism at the forefront of its diplomacy.

“When we are talking to a foreign government, we’re talking about the priorities of the government of the United States,” noted Keyak. Those conversations might reference the Jewish community in their country feeling unsafe, or antisemitic language from government officials or restrictions on ritual slaughter, “just to name a few,” added Keyak.

“That’s the U.S. government speaking with an ally or a partner, bilaterally, emphasizing to them that it’s the priority of the United States,” explained Keyak, “that this antisemitism is addressed, or that this antisemitism is prevented, or that their Jewish community shouldn’t feel unsafe.” ♦

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Steve Irwin is familiar with unfamiliar territory

From early experiences in public school to confronting the Confederacy in rural Pennsylvania, the congressional candidate is ready for the next challenge

By Matthew Kassel

Last summer, a couple of months before announcing that he would run for Congress, Steve Irwin, an attorney and longtime Democratic activist in Pittsburgh, was traveling through rural Pennsylvania as he considered a separate bid for lieutenant

governor. “What I saw,” he said in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*, “was really unsettling.”

The many Confederate flags that he had encountered were enough to make him “sick,” but equally if not more disturbing to Irwin, who is Jewish, was the sight of

what he described as “Nazi memorabilia” at the county fairs he had visited during his peregrinations across the state. “It’s there,” he cautioned. “But I know what it’s like to feel like being the other.”

Beginning at the age of 10, Irwin says he was subject to overt and occasionally

violent acts of antisemitic prejudice when he suddenly found himself among one of the only Jewish students in class after his family moved from Queens to the decidedly unfamiliar new territory of St. Petersburg, Fla. “I was very much in the minority,” Irwin recalled, and soon enough, “word got out” that he was different. “People literally thought we had horns, I mean *literally* thought we had horns,” he said. “I was really ridiculed. I was proselytized to every day at lunch. I was beaten up. Our house was egged.”

Irwin, now 62, recounted one particularly vivid anecdote that occurred around Christmastime in fifth grade when, during his first year in Florida, he returned home from school holding “a little red New Testament,” alarming his mother. “She went in to the principal and said, ‘What is this? This is a public school,’” Irwin told JI. “You know what they said? ‘No problem, we’ll have Steve go around to every class and tell them about Hanukkah,’ and that was the beginning of my public speaking experience. I literally went around every holiday.”

It was just one of several formative episodes, some more positive than others, that helped shape Irwin’s early self-conception as he navigated an environment that could often feel overwhelmingly hostile to his faith. “My Judaism was very much bigger in my life than it ever had been before,” he explained. But his Jewish identity, he added, “was really developed through those experiences.”

Such memories are fresh in Irwin’s mind as he mounts his first bid for public office in Pennsylvania’s newly drawn 12th Congressional District, where four years ago, a lone gunman carried out the deadliest antisemitic attack in American history, killing 11 people and wounding six at the Tree of Life Synagogue in the heavily Jewish neighborhood of Squirrel Hill.

“We all are suffering from post-traumatic stress from that event,” said Irwin, a former congregant at Tree of Life who says he knew half of those who were murdered. “It’s something that we continue to be experiencing, the whole tragedy,” he added. “We’re in the middle of it still. The trial hasn’t occurred.”

At the same time, he said, sounding a note of optimism, the Jewish community

in Pittsburgh has since built a diverse array of meaningful relationships across the interfaith spectrum, including with local Muslim leaders and Black clergy members who reached out after the shooting to lend their support. “We’ve gotten closer in so many ways here in Pittsburgh because of Tree of Life,” said Irwin, a representative for the Anti-Defamation League’s Midwest regional board who has long been involved in organized Jewish life in Pennsylvania. “We’ve built bridges.”

Since he launched his campaign last November, Irwin — who shares a name but no relation with the late Australian crocodile hunter — has carved out a lane for himself as the leading establishment candidate in the May 17 primary. He recently notched a major endorsement from outgoing Rep. Mike Doyle (D-PA), who said in a statement that Irwin would “work with” President Joe Biden “to pass an agenda that helps working people” and that he would “deliver results.”

“I’ve got all this experience and we’ve got all these problems that we’re facing,” Irwin told JI. “I’m watching the way that government’s responding to the pandemic, I’m watching what’s happening with antisemitism, I’m looking at what’s happening throughout the world and the existential challenges that we face here in this region and beyond. I said, ‘I need to step up.’”

Irwin’s chief rival, Summer Lee, is a rising star in local progressive politics now finishing her second term as a state legislator. The 34-year-old Democratic Socialist — who, if elected, would become Pennsylvania’s first Black congresswoman — has consolidated support from the activist left at the state and national levels. Her coalition includes such like-minded progressives as Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) as well as organized labor groups and the Sunrise Movement.

The other Democratic candidates in the race include Jerry Dickinson, a constitutional law professor at the University of Pittsburgh, and Jeff Woodard, the executive director of Pennsylvania College Access Program.

While Irwin says he supported Lee and donated to her campaign when she unseated an entrenched Democratic incumbent in 2018 — part of a wave of progressive upsets

that have recently disrupted the Democratic status quo in Pittsburgh and its surrounding suburbs — he argues that she is ultimately unqualified for the House. “She just hasn’t been around long enough,” said Irwin. “We need someone who knows how to get things done and is going to get things done. That’s my definition of progressivism: We make progress.”

Irwin himself has never held elected office but previously worked in the administration of Ed Rendell, the former Democratic governor of Pennsylvania, and before that served as a legislative assistant for Arlen Specter, the late senator who was then a Republican. He decided to “cross the line” and join Specter’s staff because the senator, who later became a Democrat, “had a reputation as being very moderate,” a quality that Irwin suggested he would bring to the House as well.

“I feel that I’m a bridge-builder,” he told JI, arguing that his recent experience working with both Democrats and Republicans as the state advisory board chair of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission has prepared him for tough negotiations. “I don’t see my chief opponent in this race as someone who is accomplishing that.”

His criticism underscores a central animating tension between mainstream and progressive Democrats, who are preparing to face off in a number of increasingly contentious primary battles for safely blue House seats this cycle while sparring over such issues as infrastructure spending and American foreign policy in the Middle East.

For his part, Irwin took particular issue with Lee’s past statements on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which, as in recent primaries in other post-industrial cities like Cleveland and the Bronx, is now emerging as a divisive issue in the race. “The things that she has suggested and said do not indicate a strong conviction that Israel has a right to exist and is recognized as a valid Jewish homeland,” Irwin charged. “To deny Israel’s central place in Judaism is a real problem for me.”

Lee’s public statements on the conflict appear limited to just a couple of social media comments during the war in Gaza last May. In one tweet, she argued that the “US has nvr shown leadership in safeguarding human rights of folks its othered,” drawing

a parallel between the shooting of Trayvon Martin and Israel's military actions amid escalating violence with Hamas. Taking aim at "American pols" who "use the refrain 'Israel has the right to defend itself' in response to undeniable atrocities on a marginalized pop," Lee said she couldn't "help but think of how the west has always justified indiscriminate & disproportionate force & power on weakened & marginalized ppl."

Asked to corroborate Irwin's claim that his opponent does not believe Israel has a right to exist, his campaign manager, Alistair Glover, described Lee as a "vocal critic of Israel." Citing her recent tweets, Glover said that Lee had "compared Israel's actions against Palestinians to George Zimmerman's killing of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African-American who was unarmed when Zimmerman shot him."

Glover also noted that Lee is a former member of the Democratic Socialists of America, which endorsed her first bid for public office in 2018 and "has supported" the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement "against Israel and criticized the country's efforts to defend itself from Palestinian attacks." He added that Lee is backed by the progressive group Justice Democrats, which asks that candidates express support for conditioning U.S. aid to Israel as part of its endorsement process.

In a statement to JI, Annie Weinberg, Lee's campaign manager, said, "State Rep Lee has always supported Israel's right to exist, and her opponent should point to any statements she has made that indicate otherwise. She has never been a part of the BDS movement, but opposes the criminalization of free speech. She believes that the US should hold all its closest allies accountable to international law and human rights standards, which means that taxpayer-funded military aid to Israel should have conditions ensuring the prevention of further illegal annexation of Palestinian land, expansion of settlements, Palestinian home demolitions and the detention of Palestinian children."

Lee is expected to address such issues directly during a virtual conversation with the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh on Monday night.

Still, local Jewish leaders who spoke

with JI expressed reservations over Lee's affiliation with the party's progressive flank as well as some of her past remarks, even if they did not go as far as Irwin. "I don't know what her positions have been so I don't want to unfairly paint her position on Israel," said Jeffrey Letwin, a lawyer and Democratic activist who is supporting Irwin's campaign. "But she has described herself as progressive, and what we're seeing in Congress is that the progressive wing of the party has staked out a position on Israel that is not as fair as I'd like to see."

Dan Frankel, a Democratic state representative in Pittsburgh who has endorsed Irwin, said he has had "some concerns" about Lee's approach to the Middle East "based on conversations" they have had on "foreign policy issues and support for Israel." Frankel, who said he has developed a "good working relationship with" Lee and "actively worked to get her reelected in 2020," declined to elaborate on the specifics of their discussions, at risk of alienating a fellow member of his caucus.

In recent months, the primary has drawn interest from national pro-Israel groups such as Pro-Israel America, a grassroots advocacy group, and Democratic Majority for Israel, both of which have endorsed Irwin. In a statement to JI, Rachel Rosen, a spokesperson for DMFI's political arm, expressed concern over Lee's endorsement from Justice Democrats while also suggesting that both Lee and Dickinson "have a history of making disparaging remarks about the U.S.-Israel relationship."

Dickinson, who unsuccessfully challenged Doyle in 2020, has previously criticized U.S. assistance to Israel and other countries on social media but has otherwise rarely commented on Middle East foreign policy in public, beyond a recent conversation with the local Jewish federation.

In an interview, Dickinson said he is against conditioning U.S. aid to Israel, which he described as "problematic," and supports the memorandum of understanding between the two countries that guarantees such funding. "My perspective is U.S. federal aid is and always will be instrumental to Israel's security," Dickinson, whose nephew is a student at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, told JI. Dickinson said he was

"open" to "end-use restrictions" of the sort favored by the liberal group J Street, which argues that U.S. aid should only be used for "legitimate security purposes."

Laura Birnbaum, J Street's national political director, said the group has "spoken with all the candidates in the race" and is "interviewing Jerry Dickinson and Summer Lee this week." Both candidates "are being considered for J Street's 'primary approval' designation, which we use to signal alignment on our issues" and which "opens up multiple candidates to receive contributions from" members, she told JI. "We're not planning to endorse outright in this race."

For Irwin, such issues run deep. He first visited Israel in 1975 on a summer-long pilgrimage with United Synagogue Youth, a movement affiliated with the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. "I had some pretty extraordinary experiences," he said of the excursion — during which he turned 16 — despite that his hotel had been "bombed literally days before" the group arrived.

On the trip, Irwin "realized two different realities," as he writes in a lengthy position paper. "One showcased Israel's radiant beauty manifested through many facets," but a "darker picture" had also surfaced — "one of terror and fear of the unknown."

"As we traveled in a bus in Haifa on July 4, a bomb exploded in the plaza facing our base hotel in Jerusalem, killing 15 people," he elaborates. "The bomb had been planted by a Palestinian posing as a delivery man. A balcony from our hotel was ripped off in the explosion."

Irwin has since returned to Israel four times, including shortly after the Tree of Life shooting, when he visited Jerusalem with the former mayor of Pittsburgh, Bill Peduto, and deposited notes from family members affected by the massacre into the crevices of the Western Wall.

Those experiences are just a few examples demonstrating Irwin's "uniquely personal" connection with Israel, said Jeff Mendelsohn, the executive director of Pro-Israel America, which has listed the primary as among the most important races of the cycle. "It's not the only issue, obviously, but it is very personal for him," Mendelsohn added, "and I think as a member of Congress

that will be evident.”

From a policy standpoint, Irwin supports continued security assistance for Israel while arguing that BDS “purports a false reality rooted in anti-Zionist ideals” and “is a destructive global movement.” He says he is in favor of U.S. funding for the Palestinians in accordance with Taylor Force Act, which withholds aid to the Palestinian Authority on the condition that Ramallah ends payments to families of terrorists.

Irwin, who believes the U.S. embassy should remain in Jerusalem, endorsed a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But he believes that attempts by “outside forces” to “impose a resolution” are “doomed for failure and will only prolong hostilities.” Instead, he favors legislation like former Rep. Nita Lowey’s Middle East Partnership for Peace Act, “which promotes people-to-people initiatives between the Israelis and Palestinians to advance peaceful co-existence,” as he put in his position paper. “These types of efforts will lead to community building, dialogue and reconciliation.”

He also backs efforts to expand the Abraham Accords, which normalized diplomatic relations between Israel and a number of Arab nations, including the United Arab Emirates, a country he visited in 2018 on a delegation with the American Middle East Institute.

The accords have contributed to broader stability in the region, Irwin says, in part because they have helped counter Iran. While Irwin says that the original iteration of the Iran nuclear deal “had serious shortcomings,” abandoning the agreement, as the Trump administration did in 2018, “has enabled Iran to move closer to having the bomb.” He supports the Biden administration’s renewed efforts to negotiate another deal, while clarifying that “any new agreement must” include “rigorous inspection” while addressing Iran’s ballistic missile program as well as “Russia’s role” in the discussions.

At the state level, Irwin advocates for strengthening “cultural and economic ties” between Pennsylvania and Israel, including in the healthcare and technology sectors, and favors increased federal security funding for Jewish nonprofit institutions.

Jeffrey Finkelstein, the president and

CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, said Irwin “has been involved with” local Jewish issues for decades, including volunteer work on fundraising drives as well as chairing the Community Relations Council. “He cares deeply about our Pittsburgh Jewish community.”

According to a 2017 study conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University’s Steinhardt Social Research Institute, Pittsburgh is home to a Jewish population of nearly 50,000, approximately three-fifths of whom have visited Israel, suggesting that Middle East foreign policy considerations could weigh on a number of Jewish voters in the district.

With just over a month to go until the election, the dynamics of the race remain mutable as Irwin and Lee engage in what many experts view as a head-to-head battle for the nomination. Though Pittsburgh has been trending in a more progressive direction over the past few years, the updated district, which became somewhat less Democratic after the new congressional map was approved, could complicate that dynamic. The new lines take in moderate voters in the southern suburbs of Allegheny County as well as a western sliver of the conservative-leaning Westmoreland County.

Both Irwin and Lee have experienced some setbacks in recent months. Lee, who lives in Swissvale, was drawn out of the district in February, though only by a few blocks. Last month, Irwin’s campaign acknowledged that a petition circulator appeared to have forged some signatures, “a definite and well-publicized misstep,” said Lewis Irwin, a professor of political science at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. “At the same time,” he added, Dickinson “may split off some of the progressive votes, which would be to Irwin’s advantage.”

“This race is truly an open one that will likely hinge on the respective candidates’ advertising in the next month,” Irwin told JI, “as well as their ground games as they seek to build and turn out enough supporters to win a plurality of the vote.”

The candidates have yet to report their latest fundraising totals, which are due on April 15, but Irwin led the field last quarter, ending the year with nearly \$300,000 on hand, according to the Federal Election Commission. Lee was sitting on just over

\$200,000 as of Dec. 31.

Joseph Corrigan, a Democratic strategist in Philadelphia who supports Lee and has donated to her campaign, anticipates that the primary could become increasingly nasty in the coming weeks, particularly now that DMFI has indicated its interest in the race. The pro-Israel group spent more than \$2 million last summer in a hotly contested special House election in the Cleveland area but has not yet publicly indicated what sorts of investments it will make in the midterms.

DMFI did not respond to a request for comment from JI on its plans for the primary.

However the race goes, Irwin, who has long considered running for office, seems to be savoring his time on the trail. Recently, at a bingo event in Whitehall, he pulled out his accordion, which he played as a teenager in a fairly popular Klezmer band called Solomon and the Wise Guys, and performed “The Pennsylvania Polka” for a crowd of 100 or so voters “You know what?” he said. “They were on their feet. They were clapping. They were excited. They took signs, petitions. Whatever it takes.”

Meanwhile, Irwin remains convinced that he entered the race for the right reasons. In high school, Irwin starred as Mordecai in a musical production of the Purim story, with songs from “The Man of La Mancha.”

“‘To dream the impossible dream,’ you know, the whole thing with Esther,” Irwin said, referring to the Jewish queen of Persia who, with help from her cousin Mordecai, foils a plot to eradicate the Jews.

Lately, Irwin said he has been thinking about that role again as he runs for office. “I really think this is kind of like my Mordecai moment,” he said. “I’m a Jew. That’s who I am. I can’t deny it.” ♦

Is Mark Brnovich conservative enough for Arizona?

The Senate candidate and Grateful Dead fan is on a 'long, strange trip' in a changed Republican Party

By Matthew Kassel

Mark Brnovich, the attorney general of Arizona and a leading Republican candidate for Senate, boasts the sort of establishment credentials and prominent statewide profile that have given him a running start as he competes in one of the most high-profile races of the midterm elections.

His studded résumé, in contrast with an array of lesser-known GOP rivals, suggests some continuity with an individualist style of Republican politics that, while often idealized, has long been venerated in the historically conservative Copper State. As a college freshman, for instance, Brnovich interned with the self-proclaimed maverick John McCain, who was then a congressman, and later directed the Goldwater Institute's Center for Constitutional Government, whose namesake, the former senator and McCain predecessor Barry Goldwater, is a founder of modern conservatism.

Brnovich, an experienced prosecutor who leans libertarian, casts himself as a party faithful who, as the state's top law enforcement official, is also charting a solo path in the spirit of his personal heroes, including Robert F. Kennedy, Muhammad Ali and Jerry Garcia, the revered frontman of his favorite band, the Grateful Dead.

"It's a long, strange trip," Brnovich, 55, quipped in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*, invoking a popular line from "Truckin," the shuffling Grateful Dead classic.

Lately, though, Brnovich — whose gravelly voice and scruffy beard contribute somewhat to his image as an avowed Deadhead — appears to have found himself adrift as former President Donald Trump has asserted his psychedelic spell over Arizona's warped political landscape.

Brnovich, who launched his campaign last June, has struggled to balance his messaging with appeals to Trump's base, which remains in thrall to the former president's unfounded attacks on the outcome of the 2020 presidential election.

Brnovich might as well have committed political apostasy when he acknowledged that Joe Biden had won the election and sat alongside Arizona Secretary of State Katie Hobbs, a Democrat, as she certified the results in November 2020. More recently, the two-term attorney general has somewhat conspicuously dragged his feet on an investigation connected with the findings of a partisan election audit, commissioned by the Republican-controlled state Senate, that reaffirmed Biden's victory.

Weeks before announcing his run, Brnovich took fire from the former president, who dismissed him as "lackluster" in a blistering statement. "He is always on television promoting himself," Trump said last May, "but never mentions the Crime of the Century, that took place during the 2020 Presidential Election, which was Rigged and Stolen." While the former president appears to have softened his rhetoric in recent months — having described the Senate hopeful as a "good man" at a rally in Arizona last January — Trump has also emphasized that he is "anxiously waiting" for Brnovich to declare that the election was a "total fraud."

Uncharacteristically for the often disputatious attorney general, Brnovich has shied away from addressing such tensions, arguing instead that he has been out front on election issues for longer than his opponents, who have faced little to no resistance from the former president. The attorney general, who includes a section about "restoring election integrity" on the issues page of his campaign website, cited

a consequential Supreme Court case last summer in which he successfully defended some voting restrictions in Arizona that critics had accused of discrimination against minorities. "I stepped up, not my opponents," Brnovich said. "They didn't file briefs. That was me."

Even as Brnovich touts his decidedly hardline approach, one of his chief Republican rivals, Blake Masters, has more willingly pandered to Trump's election lies. The well-funded venture capitalist has falsely declared that "Trump won in 2020," and in an interview with *JI* not long ago, described Brnovich as "weak on election integrity." Meanwhile, a pro-Masters super PAC — buoyed by a \$10 million donation from his former boss, the right-wing tech billionaire Peter Thiel — has released attack ads targeting Brnovich over his alleged disloyalty to the former president.

The other GOP candidates in the August primary include Jim Lamon, a solar executive who has used a personal loan of at least \$13 million to cut one of the more incendiary TV ads of the current election cycle; Michael McGuire, a former adjutant general of the Arizona National Guard; and Justin Olson, a state utility regulator who recently served as the chief financial officer of Turning Point USA, a Trump-aligned campus advocacy group.

The former president has so far withheld his endorsement, despite attending a fundraiser for Masters last November. In conversation with *JI*, Brnovich was reluctant to dwell on Trump's thought process, sounding mildly exasperated when the subject was raised. "I don't know what the president or anyone else is going to do," he said. "But I learned a long time ago in my career that if you want to talk about me and what I believe and why I believe it, I will talk

to you about it and I will tell you.”

With five months remaining until the primary, the field remains mutable, even more so now that Arizona’s Republican governor, Doug Ducey, has finally removed himself from contention. The term-limited governor had resisted entreaties from GOP leadership in Washington who believed he was the party’s best shot to unseat Sen. Mark Kelly (D-AZ), the vulnerable Democratic incumbent.

Brnovich said he respects “the job” Ducey “is doing” but declined to comment on any conversations about the race he has had with the governor, who has also drawn rebukes from Trump for affirming the presidential election results. Ducey’s exit was no doubt fortuitous for a relatively mainstream candidate like Brnovich, who has led public polling on the race, even as most voters say they are still undecided. But his surprisingly sluggish fundraising has, up to this point, proven incommensurate with his prestige status as a well-known elected official, fueling speculation over his viability.

According to the latest filings from the Federal Election Commission, Brnovich has raised just over \$1.8 million, but entered the new year with only \$770,000 on hand. He has been far outpaced by Lamon, who said he will ultimately spend \$50 million of his own money, as well as Masters, who was sitting on \$1.8 million as of Dec. 31. On Friday, Masters announced that his campaign had pulled in \$1.1 million in the first quarter of 2022.

A spokesperson for the Brnovich campaign declined to disclose his latest fundraising numbers before the filing deadline on April 15.

While Brnovich entered the primary as a “soft frontrunner based on name ID and the fact that he had been elected statewide,” said Jessica Taylor, a Senate elections forecaster for the nonpartisan *Cook Political Report*, “what he hasn’t been able to do is capitalize on that.” The attorney general is “just not running an impressive campaign by any means,” she told JI. “Unless he is able to match financial mettle,” Taylor added, “he could very well lose.”

For the moment, Kelly, a former astronaut who is seeking his first full term after unseating a Republican incumbent in 2020, maintains a comfortable cash advantage,

having finished the year with approximately \$19 million on hand. But the general election matchup, which *Cook* rates a toss-up, is widely expected to be competitive, due in part to seemingly favorable political headwinds for Republicans gunning to regain their majority in the upper chamber.

Ron Ober, a political consultant in Phoenix who supports Kelly and has worked closely with his campaign, believes the senator will be tough to beat, but he expressed uncertainty as to who among his Republican challengers would advance beyond the primary. “It’s unclear if Masters or Lamon can level the playing field with just money,” Ober told JI. “The conventional wisdom says that Brnovich has the advantage until he doesn’t.”

In the interview with JI, Brnovich was sanguine about his prospects. “Fortunately, no one has to guess where I stand because I’ve been involved in every single major fight in not only Arizona but this country over the last seven years,” he said. “When you look at law and order, someone that’s actually been toe-to-toe with the cartels and gangbangers, when you look at someone that literally lives in the same neighborhood they grew up in and cares about the price of gas and the price of groceries — I am a consistent rule-of-law Republican, and I think that’s what Arizonans want.”

Thomas J. Volgy, a professor of political science at the University of Arizona in Tucson, said Brnovich “has been actively using his position as attorney general with a series of high-profile lawsuits to challenge Democratic policies and to enshrine his very conservative credentials.”

But it has been “hard to tell” how Brnovich is distinguishing himself ideologically from his primary challengers, according to Volgy. “All have tilted very far to the right in order to contest for conservative Republican votes,” he told JI in a recent email exchange. “In fact, given the short time between the primary and the general election, this tilt becomes a very significant liability both for Brnovich and his competitors.”

Echoing some of the red-meat conservative talking points that are now circulating in the race, Brnovich says he is running to address such issues as border security, federal government overreach, “attempts to socialize our economy” and

policies that, he argues, “make us dependent on our energy needs from tyrants and dictators all over the world.”

Despite overlap with his opponents, Brnovich insisted that he is the only true believer in the race. “Arizonans deserve a senator that represents Arizona values, not somebody that’s trying to buy a Senate seat to fuel their own ego,” Brnovich, who lives in Phoenix and is the son of ethnic Serbian immigrants from the former Yugoslavia, told JI. “I am somebody whose family has not just studied history, but lived it. My parents lived through World War II, they lived through communism, and I think anytime when you have that kind of background, you understand how important freedom is and how fragile liberty is.”

On foreign policy matters, particularly in the Middle East, Brnovich drew a contrast with Masters, whose non-interventionist approach has raised questions among Jewish community activists who have voiced concern that such views could influence his position on maintaining U.S. security assistance for Israel. Masters, for his part, has clarified that he is in favor of providing aid to Israel, while emphasizing a broader skepticism of funding for other countries.

Brnovich, however, cast doubt on the authenticity of that explanation. “I think it’s easy for someone who’s dropped into a Senate race that’s being supported by an out-of-state billionaire,” he told JI, “to say one thing and when they’re in front of another group or another show or on radio or TV, they’re saying something completely different.”

Describing himself as an “unabashed supporter of Israel” for his “entire life,” Brnovich said he is “wholeheartedly” in favor of continued U.S. security funding as well as supplemental assistance for Israel’s Iron Dome missile-defense system. Israel, he said, “is literally at the tip of the spear, and so anything that we do to help Israel helps the United States.”

Brnovich drew a parallel with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which he described as a “reprehensible attack,” to illustrate his support for security funding. “Folks need to understand that there are people out there that don’t respect international borders and mean us harm,” he said. “It’s important to

have a good offense.”

In the fall of 2018, Brnovich visited Israel — “at no taxpayer expense,” he hastened to clarify — for the second time since he assumed office. During the trip, he attended a financial technology conference in Tel Aviv and, with help from the Jewish National Fund, visited the city of Sderot near the border with Gaza, an experience he characterized as instructive. “I understand the threats to Israel’s existence are very, very real,” said Brnovich, recalling that he had toured a JNF-sponsored indoor recreation center designed to protect against rocket attacks from Hamas. “I’ve seen it firsthand.”

Looking elsewhere in the region, Brnovich endorsed legislation aimed at strengthening and expanding the Abraham Accords, which normalized diplomatic relations between Israel and a number of Arab nations in a series of historic agreements brokered by the Trump administration.

Brnovich opposes the Biden administration’s ongoing efforts to renegotiate a nuclear agreement with Iran, suggesting that the deal would jeopardize Israel’s security as well as broader stability in the Middle East. He argued for imposing economic sanctions that, he believes, will restrict Iran’s ability to create a nuclear weapon, and indicated that he is in favor of a range of diplomatic options, but did not provide specifics.

While he has no professional experience in the foreign policy realm, Brnovich touted his legal efforts to counter the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement targeting Israel. In Arizona, he said he has upheld a state law that prohibits government-funded contractors from boycotting the Jewish state. He has also taken the fight to the national level. Last year, for instance, Brnovich joined a multi-state coalition defending anti-BDS legislation in Arkansas that was found to have been in violation of the First Amendment. Brnovich, however, rejects the argument that such bills are unconstitutional, arguing instead that boycotts of Israel are potentially engaging in what he describes as “country-of-origin discrimination.”

Brnovich has suggested that the BDS movement is motivated by anti-Jewish prejudice and amounts to “economic

warfare” against Israel. “It seems like there’s a lot more hatred, there’s a lot more anger in this country and the world, and historically, when there are economic tensions, you get different ethnic groups scapegoated,” he mused. “We do have an obligation,” he added, “to stand up and call out” instances of “overt or even subtle antisemitism” wherever they occur.

In his own state, lawmakers from both sides of the aisle recently censured Republican state Sen. Wendy Rogers in a rare bipartisan vote, condemning social media comments in which she had espoused antisemitic conspiracy theories and called Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky a “globalist puppet” after speaking at a white nationalist conference hosted by a prominent Holocaust denier.

Brnovich, who commended the vote, emphasized that the legislature “is its own body” and that he respects “the separation of powers” between his office and the state Senate. “I think that was a very strong message,” he explained, “and an indication that anyone that coddles up to anyone engaging in any sort of antisemitic rhetoric, we have no tolerance or place for that in Arizona.”

In February, Brnovich was named in a lawsuit challenging the potential use of hydrogen cyanide — otherwise known as Zyklon B, the lethal gas found at Auschwitz — in executions of death row inmates in Arizona. Filed by the American Civil Liberties Union of Arizona on behalf of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Phoenix, the suit argues that hydrogen cyanide is a form of “cruel and unusual punishment” that violates the state constitution.

Asked to address the lawsuit, Brnovich said “we need to keep in context why we have the death penalty,” adding: “Just like Adolf Eichmann deserved to be killed and the other Nazis that perpetuated crimes against humanity deserved” punishment, “I think society has a right to defend itself, and that includes executing those who commit unspeakable crimes.”

Tim Eckstein, who chairs the JCRC’s board in Phoenix, argued that Brnovich and his co-defendants have failed to address the substance of the suit, which does not call for the abolishment of the death penalty.

“They’re not engaging on the core issue we’ve raised,” he said.

Brnovich, who has filed a motion to have the suit dismissed, said he could not comment directly on ongoing litigation. “I’m really kind of limited in getting into the weeds with the details of the different kinds of chemicals and drugs and the proposals,” he said. “We do the legal arguments, but it’s ultimately the Department of Corrections that comes up with the method.”

Eckstein does not believe the lawsuit has created tension between Brnovich and Jewish community leaders in Arizona who object to hydrogen cyanide. “He did not create this issue,” Eckstein told JI.

The same, of course, might be said of his strained relationship with Trump.

Brnovich, who previously worked as a lobbyist for the Corrections Corporation of America, has held prosecutorial positions at the state and federal levels. He has also served as the director of Arizona’s Department of Gaming and as a command staff judge advocate in the U.S. Army National Guard.

In his quest to claim the seat once occupied by his old boss, John McCain, Brnovich said he recognized that there were challenges ahead, even as he expressed confidence that he would prevail.

“I know there’s a lot of folks and there’s a lot of special interest and out-of-state money trying to influence this race,” Brnovich said. “When you’re a public school kid with a funny last name, you learn early on that you’ve just got to be a straight shooter, you’ve got to work hard, and you’ve got to be tough,” he emphasized. “You’ve got to be able to take a punch and give a punch.”

It was unclear, though, if he was including the former president in that assessment. ♦

Detroit's Janice Winfrey hopes to oust Rashida Tlaib

Winfrey told JI she's pulled in \$200,000 since entering the race in February

By Marc Rod

Armed with a strong initial fundraising total, longtime Detroit City Clerk Janice Winfrey is coming out swinging in her challenge to Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI).

Winfrey told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview that she had not been planning to run for Congress but felt the district — which includes parts of her home city of Detroit as well as a number of outlying areas — “is not being represented,” describing Tlaib’s vote last year against the bipartisan infrastructure package as “the last straw.” Winfrey entered the race in February and has since raised \$200,000, she told JI.

“It appears to me that my opponent is more interested in political gain than she is in serving our constituents,” Winfrey said. “For me, that just makes my teeth itch... For you to run as a Democrat in that district and then don’t support our Democratic president, and don’t support some of the benefits that would directly benefit our community, I feel like you have another agenda. When you don’t support the one ally that we have in the Middle East, then I feel you have another agenda, and that agenda is not conducive to the citizens of the 12th Congressional District.”

While Winfrey, who was first elected city clerk in 2005, has strong name recognition in the city itself, local political analysts told JI when she first announced her campaign that her name recognition is lower outside of the city itself. But, analysts said, Winfrey’s deep ties to Detroit and identity as a Black woman could give her a boost in the August primary.

Winfrey also has a large gap to fill in the money race. As of the end of 2021, Tlaib was sitting on a \$1.4 million war chest, but Winfrey’s initial haul is a start, one local analyst said.

“If she’s actually raised \$200,000 already, then she’s had a good first six weeks

of her campaign. That’s a respectable total. She needs to raise a hell of a lot more, but if she’s actually got 200 in the bank, color me impressed and a little surprised,” Adrian Hemond, a local political consultant, told JI. Hemond led then-Rep. John Conyers’ (D-MI) campaign in 2016, when Winfrey challenged him.

“That doesn’t mean she’s going to win, but that’s at least a viability signal, and a pretty strong one, that Congresswoman Tlaib could have a race on her hands,” Hemond continued.

Hemond argued that, while Tlaib is typically successful at pulling in small-dollar donations, she has been less successful in fundraising from PACs and major donors. “If Janice Winfrey is actually doing that, then she may well have a fighting chance,” he continued.

He noted, however, that Winfrey’s campaign has lagged behind in “visibility” thus far — little earned media coverage, no active social media presence and a bare-bones campaign website. But, with \$200,000 in the bank, “you can turn the spigot on that stuff pretty quick.”

For her part, Winfrey argued that she may actually hold a name recognition advantage over Tlaib in some areas of the district where Winfrey ran against Conyers in 2016. Winfrey finished that race with 39.2% of the vote, coming in more than 20 points behind Conyers, and raised just \$84,000.

“I’m the only candidate that got 40% of the vote against John Conyers any time anybody has ever run against him, and I did that with virtually no money,” she said. “The 12th Congressional District — they know me, they know my work. They know I’m a hard-working, sincere public servant. I don’t do things for my own personal gain or what I think is best for a small interest group or buddies.”

The Detroit city clerk said her reputation

and name recognition in the district has been boosted by hiring election workers from throughout the district.

Winfrey also bragged of a long record of successful annual elections, of being an outspoken voice against Republican questioning of the 2020 presidential election results in Michigan and of pulling off a successful November election during the pandemic.

But that record was marred by vote-counting issues surrounding the 2020 August primary, as well as longer-running concerns about slow election returns, which analysts said could be a drag on Winfrey’s campaign.

Winfrey largely blamed the COVID-19 pandemic for the issues in the 2020 primaries, suggesting that many elderly poll workers had died from the virus or stayed away, and that state stay-at-home orders complicated recruitment and training. She also accused the City of Detroit of offering up untrained workers to fill the gaps.

“That August election was not reflective of the work that we typically do,” she said. “Because of the pandemic, because we were [in a] stay-at-home order, because we couldn’t train and we had to take these poll workers from whoever the city had available to us.”

Winfrey said that her office remediated these issues for the general election and now “have a template in place for a nearly perfect election.”

During last year’s city clerk race, which she won by more than 40 points, Winfrey also faced criticisms of her tax debt of nearly \$65,000, which resulted in a lien on her home. At the time, she shrugged off the *Detroit Free Press* report that revealed the tax debt as a political hit job and said she and her husband are on a payment plan with the IRS. Winfrey previously faced a Detroit city income tax debt in 2011, which

led the city to garnish her wages.

If elected, Winfrey would play to her experience — focusing on protecting democracy and expanding voting rights. She also said that infrastructure, quality education and rising crime rates will also be priorities.

Winfrey said crime — which political analysts anticipate will be a major weakness for Democrats this November — “needs to be handled in a better way,” and recounted that her neighborhood was locked down because of a shooting the morning she spoke to JI.

“That’s what I woke up to — and I don’t live in a bad neighborhood,” she said. “But these are the things that I have to face when I leave my house in the morning.”

She pledged to “stand by our president because now, more than ever, we need a united party... Maybe we won’t agree all the time, but certainly publicly, I will stand united with our president.”

She also said that her nonpartisan city clerk post “means that I know how to bring everybody to the table, to listen to everybody. I know how to communicate as opposed to shouting.”

The congressional hopeful emphasized her support for the U.S.-Israel relationship and military aid to Israel, as well as her opposition to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, the latter of which is supported by Tlaib, a Palestinian-American who has been vocally critical of Israel.

“I don’t say [Israel is] a perfect country, but I do know it’s an important country to Americans. I do know that, without Israel, we’re much, much weaker and vulnerable,” Winfrey said. “So how can we not support Israel?”

“I don’t care what your dislike is with the Jewish people, you don’t just wipe out a whole country, a whole group of people — that’s never the answer,” she said. “However fancy you want to make those words so it doesn’t sound like that — but that’s what it is and that’s what you want to do... And I’ll do whatever I need to do to eliminate the likes of those who want to work and dislike the Jewish people just because of who they are.”

Winfrey also addressed antisemitic elements within the Democratic Party.

“You cannot hate a group of people and

expect to serve a community or a nation or people period if you’re anti-anything,” she noted. “As an African American woman, it angers me to my soul that you hate another group of people just because they are... It grieves my soul and I will work against it, and I have always worked against it all my life.”

Tlaib’s campaign did not respond to a request for comment.

To protect Jews from antisemitic attacks in the United States, Winfrey said she will work to ensure that antisemitic hate crimes are properly prosecuted at the federal level and accompanied by “real consequences,” including jail time, for perpetrators.

“We can’t let people get away with it,” she said. “We cannot let people get away with that, period.”

Winfrey was only broadly familiar with the two-state solution, saying she was “not proficient” in Israel policy.

“My thing is whatever to keep Israel strong, to keep Israel as democratic country, I know I support that,” Winfrey said. “And I think that that two-state outcome might be the best outcome from what I would think it would be.”

Winfrey elaborated on her stance in a position paper provided to JI.

“We must have confidence in Israel’s ability to determine what is best for her own security and well-being,” Winfrey said. “While I support the U.S. conducting Middle East peace talks, the United States should not infringe upon Israel’s sovereign right to pursue peace accords best aligned with her national interests. The United States has a role to facilitate in peace talks, but not dictate them.”

In her paper, Winfrey condemned the United Nations and International Criminal Court, as well as the BDS movement, for “efforts... intended to weaken and delegitimize the Jewish State” and said they will “stop at nothing to compromise the shared Israeli-American values.”

Winfrey’s position paper also calls for “stronger oversight” over U.S. humanitarian aid to the Palestinian Authority, “to ensure that these funds aren’t improperly used to incite anti-American hatred and condemnation of Israel’s right to exist.”

During her interview with JI, Winfrey had declined to discuss U.S. aid to the

Palestinian Authority, citing a lack of familiarity with the issue. She also refrained from discussing Iran policy, but said that Tehran “needs to be watched” and should not be trusted.

But her baseline support for Israel has earned her friends among pro-Israel advocates in the Detroit area. Joshua Tobias — a director of the Ira Kaufman Chapel, the largest Jewish funeral home in the area, and a longtime friend of Winfrey and her husband — told JI he connected Winfrey with local AIPAC activists, including former AIPAC President David Victor, who organized a recent fundraiser.

“From what I can tell, as soon as she met the folks at AIPAC they fell in love with her too and are really trying to help in any way they can,” he said. “She understands the importance of America’s alliance with Israel, and it’s become a very important subject for her as well, understanding the importance in this community — she just gets it, she really understands it. And I was very pleased with the answers that I heard from her when I talked to her.”

Tobias noted that Winfrey’s family has a personal relationship with Detroit’s Jewish community. Although they were not Jewish, her in-laws worked in local synagogues for decades and had requested Jewish funerals through Tobias’ funeral home, which is how they first met. Her children also attended pre-K at a local synagogue.

“It’s been kind of an organic development of a relationship between the Jewish community and the Winfreys,” Tobias said, adding, “The only way I can describe [Winfrey] — she’s one of my favorite people in the world. She is strong, and she is one of the kindest people I know.” ♦

Mark Walker is keeping the faith in North Carolina

The former congressman and pastor, who is vying to succeed Sen. Richard Burr, is bucking Trump and facing an uphill battle to return to Washington

By Jonah Kaplan

RALEIGH, N.C.— There are many visits to Mar-a-Lago that offer a thumbs-up and high-wattage smile from former President Donald Trump as he anoints a candidate with a prized endorsement. But one such meeting late last year hosted by Trump at his Palm Beach, Fla., resort was more low-key and led to former Rep. Mark Walker (R-NC) leaving without a deal — and a determination to run a campaign his way for U.S. Senate in North Carolina.

“If it were just about the attention I would probably have Trump’s endorsement,” Walker, who represented Greensboro in the state’s 6th Congressional District from 2015-2021, told *Jewish Insider*. “I would not be doing this unless there was a definitive path to victory.”

The 2022 race for the Senate seat to replace the retiring Sen. Richard Burr (R-NC), observers say, could be the most expensive Senate contest ever. The state primary itself, however, is already shaping up to be a heavyweight bout between Walker, Rep. Ted Budd (R-NC), who represents the 13th Congressional District, former Gov. Pat McCrory and veteran Marjorie K. Eastman.

The victor in the May 17 primary will be on the November ballot versus the presumptive Democratic nominee, former Chief Justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court Cheri Beasley.

Trump has twice announced his endorsement of Budd, a three-term congressman and gun-shop owner from Winston-Salem (Trump has also announced an upcoming April 9 rally outside Raleigh). According to Walker, when redistricting combined Budd and Walker’s districts before the 2020 election, he withdrew his candidacy to allow for Budd to remain in Congress — knowing the Senate seat in 2022 would be up for grabs.

After Budd announced his own candidacy for the 2022 Senate race, Trump, in a surprise move, announced he would endorse Budd at the 2021 NCGOP convention in June. Several months later, Budd had yet to build a comfortable lead in the polls, leading Trump and his team to think about getting more involved in the race.

On Dec. 4, Trump welcomed Walker to Mar-a-Lago and reportedly offered him a deal: drop out of the Senate race and run for Congress instead — and enjoy the full endorsement from Trump and the fundraising that should come with it.

The meeting, according to Walker, was also attended by Rep. Madison Cawthorn (R-NC), Republican congressional candidate Bo Hines (North Carolina’s 13th District) and an executive from Club For Growth, the Super PAC spending millions of dollars to support Budd’s campaign.

Now four months after that meeting, Walker continues to buck Trump and walk the tightrope of embracing the America First brand but maintaining an aura of independence. Simultaneously, Walker strives to buck polls, which find him in third place behind McCrory and Budd. A new poll from Emerson College released April 5 shows Budd earning support from 38% of respondents, McCrory with 22%, and Walker at 9%.

“I’ve never done anything in my life just to be the spoiler,” Walker told *JL*. “I’ve got more important things to do.”

Walker, who is 52, is no stranger to Washington — and no stranger to being the underdog.

The son of a pastor grew up in the Florida Panhandle before coming to North Carolina as an adult for a job in finance. Despite his

initial reticence to follow in his father’s footsteps, Walker attended seminary and would become a spiritual leader of churches in Greensboro and Winston-Salem. In 2012, Walker was the pastor at Calvary Baptist Church when a friend invited him to the Republican National Convention in Tampa, giving him his first taste of politics.

Walker said that he was inspired to run for Congress in 2014, after the reelection of former President Barack Obama two years prior.

“Serving as a pastor and dealing with people from all walks of life, working in the inner cities and the refugee camps, I thought it brought a certain perspective that the Republican Party needed to understand that we were missing the mark on building relationships,” Walker said of his mission trips across the country and overseas.

In a crowded field that included the more heavily favored (and funded) Phil Berger, Jr., Walker forced a runoff in the primary and then won election to Congress in 2014. Walker would quickly rise through the ranks of caucus leadership as well, even becoming the vice chair of the Republican Conference.

“People think I’m a hard-core conservative, but there’s a reason that I’m the only Republican that’s spoken at a Historical Black College and University (HBCU),” Walker said, referencing his 2019 commencement address at Eastern Carolina State University. “That doesn’t happen by a freak of nature, it happens because I hope my approach goes beyond just trying to win the argument.”

Walker is on record as wanting to replace Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY) as Senate minority leader with Sen. Rick Scott (R-FL) should Republicans retake the majority in the midterms.

Policy-wise, Walker matches up with his rivals on issues related to trade, taxes and immigration. They’re all also consistent in

opposing President Joe Biden's domestic agenda – and would vote against his Supreme Court nominee, Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson.

As a student of the Bible, Walker maintains he's well-versed in the significance of the Holy Land, but also claims a deep political and geopolitical understanding of the region.

"I'm pretty set on my perspective," Walker insists. "To say that there's as much wrong on the Israeli side as the Palestinian side, well that's a slippery slope. That sounds like a good political talking point but it's not factual."

Walker recalled a visit to Israel in 2016 and meetings with then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, followed by a visit to Jericho, in the West Bank, to meet with Palestinian officials, the latter of which Walker said continues to haunt him.

"He screamed at us about drinking the Israeli Kool-Aid," Walker explained. "But when you raise your own children and teach them to hate another group – I've got a problem with that. I've got a problem with children being taught to be violent, and that should very easily be called out."

Walker also credits two Greensboro rabbis for adding important context and perspective on the conflict.

In his six years in Congress, Walker co-sponsored the bipartisan United States-Israel Cooperation and Regional

Security Act, as well as a House resolution denouncing "efforts to delegitimize the State of Israel and the Global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement."

He also used his social media accounts to blast "anti-Israel ideology" among some Democrats.

On Iran, Walker is ardently against the Biden administration's current negotiations with Iran and vows to vote against any deal if he's elected to the Senate.

"I very much supported President Trump getting out of the Iran deal [in 2018]. I have problems with this," he said. "If you zoom out a little in this, Russia is playing us. We're negotiating this whole thing with Iran, and how do we know we're not going to get hosed? Iran is still the leading state sponsor of terrorism in the world. As long as you're saying, 'Death to Israel' and 'Death to America,' I'm going to interpret that as saying you would do damage there."

As for incidents of domestic terrorism, including the attack on a synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, Walker said he generally supports boosting federal funds to protect Jewish institutions in the face of rising antisemitism.

"I didn't recognize the rise in antisemitism until I was briefed in Intelligence Committee meetings, and all I could think of was, where is this coming from?"

According to Walker, white supremacist groups need to be condemned outright, but he also thinks it's a "misnomer" to think antisemitism only emanates from "some small, redneck village."

"I want to be careful of pointing the finger at one group or the other, but I do think you can make a case that some of this rhetoric on the left against Israel leads to antisemitic behavior."

North Carolina's primary would have been held on March 8, if not for an order from the state Supreme Court, which halted candidate filing and ordered the General Assembly to redraw legislative districts amid concerns of gerrymandering.

The added time has opened the floodgates for more spending, with Club For Growth, a political action committee supporting Budd, intending to spend up to \$10 million in ads ahead of the rescheduled May 17 primary.

McCrory, who initially led in polls but now trails Budd, is the only one of the four candidates to have won a statewide election (though he lost reelection in 2016 with Trump on the ballot)..

Mark Walker's endorsements, according to his campaign, include Sen. Tim Scott (R-SC) and former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee.

"We're fully committed to this," he said. "The polls don't bother me and I'm not going to sit at a desk asking people for money. It matters for people to show up where they are, and I'm daggum proud to do it."

The pastor, naturally, is keeping the faith in his candidacy. ♦