

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

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MAY 6, 2022

## Meet Shimrit Meir, Naftali Bennett's key advisor

*A sharp strategic thinker with a powerful grasp on regional affairs and an effective problem-solver, Bennett's senior foreign policy advisor has fast become one of the most influential — and controversial — people in Israel today*

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Less than a year into office, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has already left an indelible mark on the world stage. Last December, he became the first Israeli leader to openly visit the United Arab Emirates; a few months later, he did the same in Bahrain. Then, in early March, he surprised the world by flying to Moscow, on Shabbat, to meet President Vladimir Putin – an attempt, he said, to mediate between Russia and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky..

Bennett turned heads again – a few weeks after the Moscow trip – holding the first-ever trilateral summit with the leaders of Egypt and the Emirates in the Sinai resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh. Over the past 11 months, he has also met Jordan's leader, King Abdullah II, spoken by phone with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey and been hosted at the White House by President Joe Biden, emphasizing to the latter clearly — but politely — that Israel will not accept a nuclear-armed Iran.

As Bennett's presence in the international arena grows, many believe the credit for turning a once-rowdy politician

into a world-class statesman and viable alternative to long-serving former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should go to Shimrit Meir, Bennett's savvy but sometimes contentious senior foreign policy advisor.

After a series of diplomatic victories, Meir, the first woman to hold this pivotal role and a newcomer to such high-stakes international diplomacy, is now said to be Bennett's closest and most trusted aide. An effective problem-solver and sharp strategic thinker with a powerful grasp on regional affairs, according to those who know and have worked with the former journalist, Meir has fast become one of the most influential people in Israel today.

Yet, even as the 42-year-old helps Bennett to gain recognition around the world, at home she has faced a stream of criticism and controversies, being labeled a divisive force in Israel's top office, and drawing no small amount of headlines in her own right.

"A storm in the Prime Minister's bureau – the controversies and debates that threaten Bennett's future," read one recent headline in the Israeli business newspaper *Globes*. "Bennett's advisor for everything – who are

you, Shimrit Meir?" read another in *ICE*, an online magazine.

Israel's top media outlet, *Mako*, affiliated with *Channel 12 News*, last month ran a full-length feature about Meir, scrutinizing how she ended up in such a key role without the usual credentials and pointing out that all those who held the position in the past came from the foreign service or the security establishment.

The article, which did not reveal most of its sources, also attempted to understand why Meir has reportedly clashed with longer-serving Bennett advisors and other members of the government, charging that she has succeeded in alienating his traditional right-wing political allies by dragging a once ultra-nationalist politician to the center-left of Israeli politics.

Last month, when Knesset member Idit Silman, who is from Bennett's right-wing Yamina party, caught the prime minister off guard by suddenly quitting the coalition, some pointed the finger at Meir as one of the triggers with claims the strategist was causing him to ignore the ideological needs of his base. Meir might be adept at advising him on foreign affairs, some said,

but with no tangible political experience herself and no regard for Bennett's right-wing supporters – most of whom hail from the Israeli settlement bloc – she had failed to understand or pay attention to the shaky foundations of his fragile government.

“Running a government is complicated. Running a government through a coalition that is hanging on by a thread is doubly complicated. Having someone in the fulcrum of power who has never served in a leadership position in the Israeli government is malpractice — and it shows,” a source who has worked closely with Meir told Jewish Insider.

“Bennett desperately needs some seasoned hands to help keep the government afloat – and he needs to start by undoing the damage that has been done by standing by and relying on Meir,” continued the source, who, like many others interviewed for this article, asked to remain anonymous.

The connection between Meir and the prime minister is said to have begun in 2014, during Operation Protective Edge, Israel's five-week conflict with Hamas in Gaza. She was a journalist at the time, known for her analytical skills and sharp, snappy tweets – she still has more than 80,000 followers on that platform; Bennett was, at the time, a government minister.

Over the subsequent years, the two are said to have forged a solid relationship, exchanging ideas and thoughts on a wide range of local and regional events from Israel's relations with its neighbors, including the Palestinians, to tackling the two-year-old COVID-19 pandemic.

Married to Gideon Gilboa, a high-tech executive, Meir, who holds a bachelor of arts degree in philosophy, political science and economics from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, grew up in the town of Holon. Her military service was spent in the famed 8200 intelligence unit, according to her official bio and following the army, Meir, who is fluent in Hebrew, Arabic, English and French, joined Israel army radio, Galei Zahal. She spent seven years there as an Arab affairs correspondent.

In 2010, Meir began working for The Israel Project, a Washington-based non-governmental pro-Israel diplomacy organization, running its outreach to the Arabic media. Three years later, she founded

*Al-Masdar* (“The Source”), an online news outlet reporting from Israel directly to the Arab world by-passing traditional censorship that is often imposed on the Jewish State. At its height, *Al-Masdar* had more than 2 million Facebook followers hailing from “Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and beyond,” according to Meir's bio. Both the website and the Facebook pages were recently transferred to other organizations.

From 2020 until joining the prime minister, Meir, who now lives in Tel Aviv, focused her energies on strategy, creating Link – the Center for Strategic Communication in the Middle East, a nonprofit that aimed to contribute to a better understanding of Israel in the Arab world.

It was as a strategist, according to Israeli media reports, that following last year's general election, Meir encouraged Bennett to join forces with Foreign Minister Yair Lapid – and to bring in the Israeli-Arab political party Ra'am – to form an alternative government to Netanyahu.

“Shimrit is very smart, creative and driven,” Jennifer Laslo Mizrahi, a longtime Jewish leader who founded and headed The Israel Project while Meir worked there, told JI. Mizrahi added “driven, focused and unflappable” to Meir's formidable skill set.

“She did tremendous work at The Israel Project to build bridges between Israel and the Arabic-speaking world,” continued Mizrahi. “Because of her, and the team she recruited and led, millions of Arabs got to see Israel from an accurate perspective. Her work was a vital part of building openings in hearts and minds that made the Abraham Accords possible.”

“I will add that she built trust with even hostile reporters by telling the truth,” said Mizrahi, adding, “the Shimrit Meir I know has no problem telling truth to power. Even when the news is bad. That is enormously valuable on a strategic team.”

However, close observers told JI that Bennett's reliance on Meir beyond just foreign affairs has left many of his veteran advisors and top aides in other government ministries feeling distanced and frustrated, causing tension at the top levels of the coalition, including with Lapid's team.

“The only person on her side is in fact

the only person who really matters at the prime minister's office and that is the prime minister,” said another source, adding that she's so busy engaging in issues unrelated to her experience that she often ignores Diaspora Jewish leaders and visiting delegations.

Another analyst explained that while “[Meir] understands the region, knows how to build relations with the Jordanians, the Egyptians and the Gulf States, which is very important, it's not enough when you are advising a prime minister of Israel and especially a prime minister with severe political constraints.”

The analyst added, however, that part of the backlash against Meir, who declined to be interviewed for this story, also stemmed from the fact that she is a woman in a senior and powerful role.

“Shimrit is talented, smart and hard-working – she was a great journalist – but she is also the first woman appointed to this role,” theorized the analyst. “I'm not sure that a man would have faced such terrible rumors – guys get to be professional and assertive, but women have to be nice as well; they are judged differently.”

“Shimrit is not a *schmoozer*, she's a doer, and that is inexcusable when it comes to women,” she added.

While it's difficult to determine if the contention surrounding her stem from chauvinism or jealousy at her achievements, what is clear is that Meir has come through for Bennett in the international sphere, allowing him to build strong ties with a Democratic administration in the U.S. and raising his standing on the world stage. ♦

# Israel is building a wall of lasers to defend against rockets. Will it work?

*Israeli officials have described the technology as groundbreaking and a game-changer for Israel and the region, despite skepticism from some analysts*

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Earlier this month, Israel's Ministry of Defense made a dramatic announcement – the successful test of a high-powered, ground-based laser interceptor system, able to defend Israel against UAVs, mortars, rockets and anti-tank missiles.

"Today marks the first time that a high-power, Israeli-made laser system successfully intercepted various targets, constituting a breakthrough on a global scale," Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz said in a statement.

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett promptly tweeted about the so-called "Iron Beam" laser defense system, a play on Israel's Iron Dome, saying it "may sound like science-fiction, but it's real." He called the new technology a "game-changer."

The April 14 announcement, which the Ministry of Defense sent out together with partner companies Elbit and Rafael, followed successful testing of a similar aerial laser system last June and was accompanied by a short video showing lots of cheers as a single laser beam lit up the night sky and sent a drone spiraling to the ground.

Smart lasers defending against the salvos of rockets that have become so familiar in recent years in Israel's conflicts with Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon would appear to be revolutionary. Yet, those paying close attention to missile weaponry and defense systems sounded a note of caution.

Lasers, analysts and experts interviewed by *Jewish Insider* said, are particularly sensitive. They are severely weakened in certain weather conditions and until they are put into a real-life battle situation, it is premature to determine if they will be able to change the future of conflicts across the globe.

"It's not a game-changer yet," Seth

Franzman, a Jerusalem-based analyst and author of *Drone Wars Pioneers*, *Killing Machines*, *Artificial Intelligence*, and *the Battle for the Future*, told JI. "It's technology that has been worked on for many years, usually without success."

He continued: "Once it's operational and if they can put the technology on long-endurance drones, then we will see if it works on the battlefield." That, he said, would most likely take a few more years.

Franzman, who also writes about Israeli defense technology for *Defense News*, added that he was surprised the announcement came before the system appeared to be fully tested in the field. "Usually, in military terms, promises should not be made unless the system and technology are fully there," he pointed out. "We've been hearing about this for years, but how does it integrate with other systems and what type of threats does it work against?"

Both Gantz and Bennett, a former defense minister, have been touting Israel's "laser-wall" building efforts for some time. Last June, following the successful test of the aerial laser system, Gantz said it was a "technological breakthrough" and a "milestone in the development of the multi-tier defense array of the State of Israel."

At the annual Institute for National Security Studies Conference in Tel Aviv in February, Bennett said the entire system, including the ground system, would be ready in "about a year."

"At first experimentally and later it will become operational," he told the audience, highlighting that it would "break the equation" whereby Israel spends millions to defend against the cheap and crudely made rockets, drones, even incendiary balloons and kites, launched from Gaza and Lebanon by Iranian proxies that sit right on Israel's borders.

"This will allow us, in the medium to long term, to surround Israel with a laser wall that protects us from missiles, rockets, UAVs [unmanned aerial vehicles] and other threats," the prime minister said. "In fact, it will take away the strongest card the enemy has against us...we will have nullified the ring of fire that Iran has set up on our borders. The whole thing will no longer pay off."

Bennett also emphasized such a defense would be attractive to Israel's new regional allies – the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and even Saudi Arabia – who also face threats from Iran and its proxies. "This is another way in which we will create assets, use them and give what we have to the world in order to gain support, create alliances and become even stronger," he said.

Uzi Rubin, the founder and former director of Israel's Missile Defense Organization and a senior researcher at the Jerusalem Institute of Strategy and Security, said Bennett was being "over-optimistic" about the prospects of a wall of lasers to seal Israel's borders.

"Lasers have limitations," he said, explaining how weather degrades their performance because they cannot penetrate clouds. "People think this is a country of eternal sunshine, but we have between 60 and 80 days of rain and cloud coverage and that renders this kind of weapons system unoperational."

Rubin said that any laser-based weaponry would have to function together with Iron Dome and Israel's other missile-defense systems such as David's Sling, which can intercept short- and medium-range threats, and Arrow-3, to stop longer-range attacks.

However, he explained that unlike such mechanisms, which lock onto the target and explode them in real time, lasers take longer, needing two to three seconds to warm up,

potentially slowing down the response time and making them less effective against large numbers of rockets.

"If the salvo of rockets is increased or they are heavier and longer-range, then lasers are less useful," Rubin said. "This system will be good against drones and simple targets that do not need too much time to be disabled, but a rocket with a warhead or encased in metal, that's another matter."

He also questioned the assumption that it would have a financial impact, saying the guns needed to fire the lasers could be even more costly than replenishing the single-use Iron Dome interceptors.

Dore Gold, president of Jerusalem

Center for Public Affairs and a former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations who has worked with Israel and the United States on developing laser defense systems in the past, said, however, that Bennett and Gantz's "game-changer" assessment was not far off the mark.

"The main thing is to compare this laser tech with the previous technology that was tested, and what really stands out in this case is the incredibly reduced cost of each interception – it can make laser defense something which any defender can afford," he told JI.

Gold said that when similar technology was tested in the past, there was a question

of reliability – would it work in the rain or in cloudy weather – which prompted Israel to ultimately go with Iron Dome, which uses a kinetic system to knock rockets out of the sky.

Iron Dome is costly, continued Gold, with Israel spending between \$80,000 per interceptor, which prompted the \$1 billion push in Congress last year for additional funding to replenish the missile-defense system.

"If indeed the price per interception drops to a few dollars from being hundreds of thousands of dollars, then that's a whole new game," he concluded. ♦

MAY 4, 2022

## Shontel Brown notches primary win: 'This was a faith fight'

*Brown bested Nina Turner by a 2-1 margin*

By Matthew Kassel

CLEVELAND — As a cluster of gathering storm clouds prepared to burst just after polls closed on Tuesday evening, the stage had been set for an appropriately cathartic end to the bitter primary rematch between Rep. Shontel Brown (D-OH) and Nina Turner in Cleveland and its surrounding suburbs.

With two-thirds of the vote, Brown claimed a decisive victory over her opponent, setting her up to win her first full House term in November and bolstering her position as the establishment heir to Ohio's 11th Congressional District.

"This was a faith fight," Brown said last night at a post-industrial event space in downtown Cleveland. "It's always been a faith fight for me. The first time, the odds were stacked against us."

The former Cuyahoga County councilwoman was defending the seat only six months after assuming office and nine months after she had pulled an upset in the special House election to succeed former Rep. Marcia Fudge (D-OH). Brown overcame an initial polling deficit of more

than 30 points to defeat Turner by a single-digit margin in the high-profile race.

"This time felt different for me because we were leading, but I still was a little unsure," Brown explained in her victory speech. "I'm just going to be fully transparent about that because we can't take anything for granted."

If Brown performed better than expected on election night, it was partly because the race had simply been more difficult to read. There was no publicly available polling, for instance, and the newly drawn district lines had pulled in a sizable portion of new voters, contributing an added layer of uncertainty.

Kent Smith, an Ohio state representative who spoke at Brown's event, offered the most succinct explanation for her success. "Let me tell you what the secret weapon of this congressional campaign is," he said to the bustling crowd. "The secret weapon is, this campaign had Shontel Brown! If the other campaign had Shontel Brown, we might not have won tonight. But we had her."

The party was attended by a number of local Democratic officials, most notably Justin Bibb, Cleveland's newly elected mayor. While Turner endorsed Bibb when

he ran for mayor last year, he did not return the favor in the primary and instead threw his support behind Brown, who has built strong ties with Cleveland's Democratic establishment as a Cuyahoga County party chair.

"I don't care what you call it — progressive, Democrat, I want a fighter in D.C.," Bibb said last night, drawing snickers from the audience.

The first race had been cast as a sort of proxy battle between warring moderate and progressive forces within the Democratic Party. Turner — a former presidential campaign surrogate for Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) — consolidated endorsements from the Squad while Brown picked up support from high-ranking House leaders such as Reps. Jim Clyburn (D-SC) and Joyce Beatty (D-OH).

But Turner was unable to build the same coalition as a challenger facing off against a freshman incumbent. While Sanders and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) both endorsed Turner's campaign, other big supporters who backed her had steered clear of the race.



Brown, for her part, joined the Congressional Progressive Caucus when she entered the House and earned an endorsement from its political action committee last month. The CPC's PAC had supported Turner in the special election.

Reps. Jim Clyburn (D-SC), Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY), Ritchie Torres (D-NY) and Nikema Williams (D-GA) all appeared in the district to stump for Brown last weekend, touting, among other things, her vote in favor of the \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure package. On the Friday before the election, President Joe Biden announced his support for Brown.

Brown also received repeat endorsements from pro-Israel groups including the Jewish Democratic Council of America, Pro-Israel

America and Democratic Majority for Israel, which spent more than \$1 million in the race.

Turner had attempted to chip away at Brown's support among Cleveland's sizable population of Jewish voters who helped deliver her to Congress last year.

But Pinchas Landis, an Orthodox Jewish rabbi who lives in the suburb of University Heights and delivered remarks at Brown's event, suggested that the Jewish voters had stood with Brown. "We saw a woman who brought this community together," he explained. "Seriously, by a show of hands, how many of you, on a Tuesday night in May, would be listening to a rabbi speak in downtown Cleveland? Seriously now, come on! Yet here we are!"

"For the Jewish community especially,

times are tough," he said to the audience, which included several Jewish supporters. "As I'm sure you know, there's been a rise in antisemitism. There's more Jew hatred in the world right now than ever before. So, to have a congresswoman who's willing to stand up and cosponsor legislation supporting the state of Israel or to stand up and tweet that antisemitism has to stop — that is something that truly is remarkable."

Brown expressed a similar if somewhat more bluntly stated level of gratitude to her own supporters on election night.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, and thank you," she said. "I cannot thank you enough." ♦

MAY 4, 2022

## 62 senators, including 16 Democrats, vote to oppose nuclear-only Iran deal

*The measure calls for addressing a wider range of Iranian activity and opposes removing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' terror designation*

By Marc Rod

A majority of senators, including 16 Democrats, voted on Wednesday night in favor of a non-binding Senate measure that opposes entering into an Iran deal addressing only the regime's nuclear program as well as the removal of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' terrorism designation. The final vote on the measure was 62 to 33.

Wednesday's vote came on a motion introduced by Sen. James Lankford (R-OK), as part of the Senate's consideration of the United States Innovation and Competition Act (USICA) aimed at countering China.

The motion instructs the senators negotiating the final bill with the House to "insist" that the legislation include language requiring any nuclear weapons agreement with Iran to include provisions "addressing the full range of Iran's destabilizing activities," including missiles, terrorism and sanctions evasion; does not lift any sanctions on the IRGC; and does not revoke the IRGC's terror designation.

The Biden administration has sought to rejoin the 2015 nuclear agreement, from which the Trump administration withdrew in 2018. The original deal did not address issues beyond Iran's nuclear program.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and Sens. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Cory Booker (D-NJ), Ben Cardin (D-MD), Chris Coons (D-DE), Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Maggie Hassan (D-NH), Mark Kelly (D-AZ), Angus King (I-ME), Joe Manchin (D-WV), Gary Peters (D-MI), Jacky Rosen (D-NV), Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ), Jon Tester (D-MT) and Ron Wyden (D-OR) voted for the measure.

The measure had reportedly become a matter of contention in the Senate, with some Democrats trying to block the vote. Lankford allegedly threatened to block Senate proceedings on the bill unless guaranteed a vote on the measure.

Iran has demanded that the U.S. withdraw the IRGC's Foreign Terrorist Organization designation. Secretary of State

Tony Blinken told Congress last week that the group would have to cease its support for terrorism in order for the designation to be withdrawn, but also argued that the designation is largely ineffectual because other IRGC sanctions would remain in place.

Shortly after the vote, Coons — a close administration ally who has been referred to as President Joe Biden's "shadow secretary of state" — said in a statement that his vote "does not undermine my continuing support for the administration's efforts to negotiate an agreement" and that he "maintains an open mind towards any potential outcomes."

He explained that he voted for the motion "in order to encourage the Biden administration's negotiations to push for the strongest possible deal that addresses Iran's nuclear weapons program and many other malign activities."

Lankford suggested that the measure was pertinent to USICA because Iran exports much of its oil products to China.

"This bill does not address China's practice of purchasing and stockpiling

sanctioned Iranian oil to the black market,” Lankford said in a speech prior to the vote. “The procurement spike by China directly correlated with the spike in terrorist activities by Iran and its proxies in the Middle East... This particular Motion to Instruct goes straight at this illicit activity from Iran that’s facilitating the terror activities.”

Sen. Chris Murphy (D-CT) argued in response that “this motion asks the Senate to endorse” the Trump administration’s

Iran policy, which, he said, “was a complete and total failure,” in pursuit of a “mythical comprehensive agreement.”

Lankford’s motion was the second measure on Iran to come up for a vote on Wednesday. Earlier in the day, 86 senators voted in favor of a motion, introduced by Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX), stating that terrorism-related sanctions on the Central Bank of Iran and the IRGC “are necessary to limit... cooperation” between Iran and China.

The Cruz motion instructs the Senate’s

negotiators on the competition bill to “insist” that the final bill include language requiring the administration to report to Congress on cooperation between China and Iran.

Twelve senators — Sens. Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Tom Carper (D-DE), Mazie Hirono (D-HI), Ed Markey (D-MA), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Chris Murphy (D-CT), Alex Padilla (D-CA), Rand Paul (R-KY), Jack Reed (D-RI), Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Brian Schatz (D-HI) and Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) — voted against the motion. ♦

MAY 3, 2022

## At Milken conference, puppies and panel discussions draw crowds

*Attendees networked and mingled as speakers shared insights on investment, AI, partisanship and more*

By Gabby Deutch

LOS ANGELES — During the first full day of the Milken Institute’s Global Conference on Monday, executives, investors and entrepreneurs gathered to discuss key global challenges. Inflation, the risk of recession, philanthropy, artificial intelligence, Alzheimer’s disease, inequality in education: All of it and more came up in panel discussions with influential speakers such as longtime Google CEO Eric Schmidt and Citigroup CEO Jane Fraser.

What makes Milken so interesting, Sinai Temple’s Rabbi David Wolpe told *Jewish Insider*, is that it’s “driven, obviously, by finance and tech and so on, but they don’t neglect the human questions.” He plans to address those questions on Wednesday on a panel with author and Harvard professor Arthur Brooks titled “Building a Better Life.”

Finding a table at the Beverly Hilton’s lobby bar or its poolside café was nearly impossible on Monday. In the afternoon, attendees flocked to the Wellness Garden — an outdoor spot that offered aromatherapy, massages and sound baths — to play with puppies that were up for adoption at a local shelter.

Dozens of panel discussions took place

throughout the day, but the hallways of the hotel were buzzing with activity throughout all of it. People came to make deals, to scout out their next philanthropic venture or simply to mingle.

“It is so good to be back in person,” said Alec Ellison, a frequent Milken attendee who is the chairman of the global investing platform OurCrowd. “I’m just running into people I haven’t seen since pre-COVID from all walks.”

The Milken Institute, which has a significant focus on public health and also hosts an annual health summit, required attendees to be vaccinated and boosted. Guests’ vaccine cards were examined at check-in. But inside the conference, things looked much as they did in 2019, save the occasional person in a mask and the packaged KN95 masks that sat, mostly unopened, on tables in the lobby.

In Monday morning’s opening session, Milken Institute CEO Michael Klowden pointed out that up to 20% of conference attendees are also speakers, adding that everyone who is speaking at the conference is also there to learn from others. Rep. Cheri Bustos (D-IL), for instance, was spotted attending a panel on women’s leadership with speakers that included

comedian Tiffany Haddish and author and former presidential candidate Marianne Williamson.

What makes Milken unique from similar conferences, said Richard Sandler, executive vice president of the Milken Family Foundation and a leader in the L.A. Jewish community, is its focus on finding solutions.

“To see the people that come from all over the world is really gratifying,” said Sandler, who has been involved with the foundation since it was started 40 years ago. The people who come to the conference “really are trying to solve problems,” he said.

Those problems range from defining American global leadership to combating extremism to fighting climate change. Several U.S. lawmakers spoke at the gathering, and being away from Washington allowed them to focus on the actual issues at play rather than the politics, said Rep. Peter Meijer (R-MI).

“I think it’s a nice break to focus on policy. And I think that one of the perennial frustrations in D.C. is how quickly politics gets wrapped up in the policy,” said Meijer, who brought his mother as his plus-one to the conference. For him, attending Milken means “being able to expand that aperture and have my assumptions challenged, to

be able to fill in some blanks where maybe we're less knowledgeable on an issue than maybe you wanted to be. It certainly doesn't have a partisan inflection."

In a one-on-one conversation with NBC News political director Chuck Todd, Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan, a Republican, spoke at length about his concerns with partisanship in the American political system. "I'm trying to provide a home for all the homeless people that don't know whether they should be in the Democratic Party or in the Republican Party," Hogan said, earning applause from the Milken crowd.

When Todd asked whether Hogan is "trying to save the Republican Party from itself," he answered, "I think so."

"There are some people in my party that are taking us off the rails," said Hogan, who touted his bipartisan bona fides — noting at several points that his approval rating among voters in the blue state is upward of 70%. Hogan predicted that former President Donald Trump, who he has spent years criticizing, will not be the Republican nominee in 2024. Instead, he offered what sounded — somewhat — like a stump speech.

"What we need is real leadership that can unite the country and somebody that can make everybody in America proud of their government again, to vote for people that

will actually try to put us in a better position and solve the problems that everyone's concerned about," said Hogan.

As a business-focused event, many of the conference's sessions focused on financial systems and on the global economy. The outlook among Milken guests was optimistic, at least about the U.S: Two-thirds believe the U.S. economy is stronger than that of other countries, according to polling of attendees done by The Harris Poll. But top finance professionals cautioned that a recession is possible in the near term.

"It's not inevitable but it is a concern," said Citi's Fraser. "I'm much more optimistic on the [United] States. I'm very concerned about Europe."

Rishi Kapoor, co-CEO of Investcorp, noted that each country or region is experiencing the current economic situation differently. "The Middle East is booming right now," said Kapoor. "It's going to be a little bit more nuanced than painting everything with the same brush."

Many events focused on bringing diverse communities together and bridging gaps, whether through financial investment, education or public service. Farah Pandith, who served as the State Department's special representative to Muslim communities in former President Barack Obama's administration, said her role in the post-9/11 world "was around puncturing the

us-versus-them ideologies that live in this country and around the world, and finding a way to use my unique background to be able to help us protect our communities," she told attendees.

Pandith, who has been involved in conversations about fighting antisemitism, including at a summit in Palm Beach, Fla., in March, warned that "this nation is not on an upward trajectory" when it comes to fighting hate.

Anti-Defamation League CEO Jonathan Greenblatt spoke about the topic on a panel about renewing social cohesion and offered a number of policy solutions, such as reforming Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act to make social platforms more responsible for the content that is posted on them.

"It's not that hard to knock the Nazis off the platform," Greenblatt said of Facebook. Last week, when Twitter announced that it would be acquired by Elon Musk, Greenblatt posted on Twitter that "the extremists are celebrating" since they expect to be allowed back onto the platform and called their response "dangerous."

But on Monday's panel, Greenblatt seemed to revise that opinion: "I'm optimistic about Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter," Greenblatt said at the event. "I think he's got lots of possibilities based on what he's said already." ♦

APRIL 29, 2022

## Mnuchin: U.S. stance toward Ukraine could reverberate in Mideast, Iran

*At Milken Conference, the former U.S. treasury secretary argued that the U.S. has a responsibility to Ukraine after helping it disarm in the 1990s*

By Gabby Deutch

LOS ANGELES — Washington's approach toward Ukraine could reverberate in its dealings with Iran and in relationships with Middle East nations, former U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said on Tuesday at the Milken Institute Global Conference here.

Washington's decision not to more strongly come to Ukraine's aid militarily

when the U.S. urged Ukraine to abandon its nuclear weapons three decades ago, Mnuchin argued, could send signals that the U.S. will not honor its nuclear commitments as it works toward a nuclear-free Iran.

"Ukraine had the third-largest arsenal of nuclear weapons, and post the Cold War, there was an agreement entered into to dismantle those nuclear weapons, signed by the United States, the U.K. and Russia,

effectively guaranteeing the borders," Mnuchin told a packed crowd at a morning panel about the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Soviet nuclear warheads were located in Ukraine's territory when the Soviet Union broke up, but Ukraine did not control its own independent arsenal. In 1994, as part of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Ukraine got rid of those warheads.

"Other countries that either have nuclear

weapons or want nuclear weapons — Iran is something I'm very concerned about — we need to make it clear that if we say you don't have nuclear weapons, and we support you, we'll support you, and that nuclear weapons are not the answer," added Mnuchin.

Mnuchin also urged Washington to repair strained ties with Middle East allies and with nations that could help pressure Russian President Vladimir Putin to end the conflict, such as China.

"We can't make this about autocracy

versus democracy, or philosophical," said Mnuchin. "We need to make this about, we believe in a rules-based system, and we need to rebuild the relationships in the Mideast. They are important. There are regional issues there as it relates to Iran and others that we haven't been focused on."

Mnuchin was joined on the panel by Rep. Victoria Spartz (R-IN), who grew up in Ukraine. She urged the Biden administration to take a stronger position on Ukraine, arguing that sanctioning Russian energy

might lead to higher oil prices, but for a brief period of time — and that her constituents can handle it.

"Do you want to have a shorter pain, maybe deeper, or do you want to have a prolonged pain for a long time? The economy is very strong. We can clean it up," said Spartz. "Good energy policy can resolve this issue much faster than people even realize." ♦

MAY 5, 2022

## Top Israeli energy official describes role of investors in promoting sustainable energy

*Investors need to fund research and development into new sustainable technologies, says chief scientist at the Ministry of Energy*

By Gabby Deutch

LOS ANGELES — Gideon Friedmann, the acting chief scientist at Israel's Ministry of Energy detailed on Wednesday how the country plans to transition to renewable energy and urged private investors to fund research in the field. Government support is important, said Friedmann, but investors will need to more forcefully enter the market if countries hope to work toward net-zero emissions.

"The private sector is not doing very well, because everyone here wants to get their return, and [a] high return. And it's not easy to get a high return on infrastructure," or a quick return, Friedmann told attendees at a panel at the Milken Institute Global Conference. According to Friedmann, it takes up to 15 years to build a power line, for instance, so any kind of fast returns would be impossible.

At several sustainability-focused panels at Milken, environmental experts and financial professionals urged investors to consider putting more money into the research and development of technologies such as carbon capturing and bringing deep geothermal heat out of the ground.

Developing new technologies may yield smaller returns in the short-term,

Friedmann argued, but it will pay dividends as more countries move away from fossil fuels.

"The money's there," Friedmann said, referring to private investments in established renewable companies focused on solar. "But it's not, of course, geared towards research and development."

Israel is looking at the transportation and electricity sectors — responsible for 85% of emissions in Israel — as the key areas to reduce emissions, said Friedmann.

Israel is a small country, "and so the way we think about innovation is that we are not going to set the trends. Trends are going to come from the outside," noted Friedmann. Instead, Israel — due to its size — can be early to adopt new technologies and trends.

Israel discovered natural gas reserves off its coast more than a decade ago, and natural gas is now used "as a bridge" in the transition to sustainable energy "because it's much less polluting" than oil, explained Friedmann. "So natural gas is a solution, but we want also to convert the natural gas to something cleaner. We want to invest in R&D to do that."

Other investment into research and development can come from the government, Friedmann added. "It's so

important to have government investment in these areas," he said. Last year the Israeli government invested \$60 million in research and development, but the bulk of the investments will need to come from private capital.

"We also work on international collaboration," Friedmann said. Israel is now collaborating with the United Arab Emirates, with which it normalized ties in late 2020, on a number of climate-related projects.

"There's a lot of activity going on between the UAE and Israel," Friedmann said. "It's not in my area particularly. There's a lot of discussion as well on R&D but nothing particularly yet. But I think in the near future there will be." ♦



# On Roe, a potential split between Orthodox Jewish groups and conservatives

*Eighty-three percent of Jews believe abortion should be legal in most or all cases*

By Marc Rod

Orthodox Jewish groups have frequently found themselves aligned with Christian conservatives at the Supreme Court on religious liberty issues. But Monday night's leaked draft opinion indicating that the Court is set to overturn *Roe v. Wade* brings into focus one area of potential difference between the frequent allies.

Christian conservatives have led the anti-abortion movement in the U.S. for decades and pushed for the Court to overturn *Roe*, the 1973 decision that said the Constitution gives women the right to choose whether to have an abortion.

Jewish interpretations of the Biblical literature on abortion vary, although many Orthodox interpretations dictate that it is allowable or necessary when the pregnancy endangers the mother's life — including in some mental health emergencies. Jewish law also diverges from conservative Christian beliefs that life begins at conception.

As a result, Orthodox Jewish positions on abortion — and the responses of Orthodox Jews to the overturning of *Roe* — may not line up neatly with those of Christian conservatives.

Abba Cohen, the vice president for government affairs for Agudath Israel of America, told Jewish Insider that the group had no comment on the leaked opinion and “can finalize no specific advocacy action” in response to the draft, but said that “the Jewish perspective on abortion is nuanced.”

He went on to explain that the Haredi group would have to review how the decision would treat specific circumstances before announcing a firm position on it.

“We would have to review the precise nuances of the final decision itself — how, for example, it treats abortion rights when the ‘mother’s life or health is endangered’ or when the ‘mother’s sincerely held religious

beliefs allow or require’ her to seek an abortion,” Cohen continued. “We would also have to carefully examine state statutes and prospective legislation on these matters. Only then can we responsibly determine the true impact of the *Dobbs* decision and future steps we might deem necessary,” he said, referring to the Mississippi case now before the Court, *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*.

In a statement on Tuesday evening, the Orthodox Union’s leadership said it “is unable to either mourn or celebrate” the news, explaining that the group does not support absolute abortion bans nor abortions when not medically necessary.

The statement describes “abortion on demand — ‘the right to choose’” as “completely at odds with our religious and halachic values” and said, “legislation and court rulings that enshrine such rights concern us deeply on a societal level.”

“Jewish law prioritizes the life of the pregnant mother over the life of the fetus such that where the pregnancy critically endangers the physical health or mental health of the mother, an abortion may be authorized, if not mandated, by Halacha and should be available to all women irrespective of their economic status,” the statement reads. “Legislation and court rulings — federally or in any state — that absolutely ban abortion without regard for the health of the mother would literally limit our ability to live our lives in accordance with our responsibility to preserve life.”

The statement further decries the “extreme polarization and politicization” of abortion.

“Human life — the value of everyone created in the Divine Image — is far too important to be treated as a political football,” it continues.

While exceptions to protect the mother’s life have been included in some state-level

laws restricting abortion, mental health emergencies and religious beliefs are generally not protected. The leaked opinion, authored by Justice Samuel Alito, does not appear to mandate that exceptions for health emergencies be included in potential bans.

The Jewish Electorate Institute’s 2022 National Survey of Jewish Voters found that 38% of Orthodox Jews said they were concerned that the Supreme Court would overturn *Roe*, compared to 70% of Conservative Jews, 81% of Reform Jews and 80% of those who specified no denomination. Overall, 75% of Jews said they were concerned.

Other research has indicated significant support for the legality of abortion among Jews at different levels of religious observance — a Pew Research Center study from 2014 found that 62% of Jews who pray at least daily and 58% of Jews who attend religious services at least weekly believe abortion should be legal in most or all cases. The survey did not specifically break down the data by denomination, but most Jews who pray daily identify as Orthodox.

The issue is also a potential point of friction for Republican Jews. The 2014 Pew study found that 67% of Jewish Republicans and 58% of Jews who identified as politically conservative believe abortion should be legal.

At large, Jews are the most supportive of abortion rights of any U.S. religious group measured by Pew — 83% of Jews support a woman’s right to choose in all or most cases.

Amy Adamczyk, a professor of sociology at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice who studies issues related to abortion, religion and public opinion, noted that the small size of the Jewish community has made its internal differences on the issue of abortion difficult to measure.

She said that Jews tend to be the most

liberal religious group overall, but said globally, views on abortion are generally shaped more by the importance people place on their religion than what religion they follow.

“If you’re someone who says that religion is highly important, kind of regardless of what your religion is, you tend to be more opposed to abortion,” she said. “If you take your religion very, very seriously, whatever that religion is, then you tend to be more opposed.”

Sheila Katz, the CEO of the National Council of Jewish Women — the most prominent Jewish community organization in the pro-choice movement — said her group is working with some prominent Orthodox rabbis.

She acknowledged the Orthodox community generally takes a more restrictive view of abortion than NCJW, but added, “the reality is there are seats for everyone at this table because this fight actually is about that too... There’s space for everyone, including those who care deeply about religious freedom issues.”

Katz’s organization — which supports broad abortion access — and other liberal Jewish groups have long fought to frame abortion rights as a matter of Jewish religious freedom, as well as an issue tied to Jewish values and social justice.

“This is a moment where the Supreme Court is very likely going to dictate when life begins based on one religion’s perception

of that — that’s not OK,” Katz told JI. “And Jews should be able to get an abortion if they want one.”

The Conservative movement’s Rabbinical Assembly, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, the Jewish Democratic Coalition of America and the American Jewish Congress have also spoken against the anticipated Supreme Court decision.

One prominent Jewish voice in the legal community urged caution about the leaked opinion itself.

Contrary to general assumptions about the document, Nathan Lewin, a seasoned constitutional lawyer who clerked for and has argued before the Supreme Court on numerous occasions, cast doubt on the notion that Alito’s leaked opinion would be reflective of the Supreme Court’s actual decision.

“I think the proposition that this is what the Court will do is wrong,” Lewin told JI.

“It is an early statement of what Justice Alito believes the Court should do. I think it is comparable to the long opinion that Alito wrote in the religious-liberty *Fulton* case (to overrule [*Employment Division*] v. *Smith*),” he continued. “As was true in *Fulton*, it may end up being a concurring opinion when the Court’s internal process is concluded and the case is decided.”

Lewin was referring to the decision last year in *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia*, in which Alito wrote a concurrence —

joined by Justices Clarence Thomas and Neal Gorsuch — which argued the Court should have gone further to overturn a past precedent on religious liberty issues.

Lewin said that he could see other justices — Thomas and possibly Gorsuch — joining Alito’s opinion in this case, but argued, “the document does not indicate that any justice joined it.” Even if the Court does overturn *Roe* this summer, the leaked opinion written by Alito may be a concurrence. The official Court opinion could use different logic, or reach a more limited conclusion.

“I think Alito probably did the same thing with regard to [*Employment Division*] v. *Smith* but he did not get Kavanaugh and Barrett to agree with him on that,” he said. “So I think, as of February 10, he may have circulated this on the hope, on the expectation that he might get a majority of the court to sign on to it. But I don’t know what’s happened since February.”

He noted that the case was argued on Dec. 1, 2021, and the leaked opinion is dated Feb. 10, 2022, which “shows an awful lot of work that could not have been done between December 1 and February 10,” explaining that Alito has likely been preparing this since before oral arguments.

He also called the leak an “outrageous breach” of Court confidentiality and said that the leaker “should certainly never be able to practice as a lawyer,” attributing to them “a very sinister motive” to place public pressure on the justices. ♦