

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

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## A Jewish Coloradan hopes to beat Boebert in November

*Adam Frisch is betting that a common-sense governing style will resonant with Colorado voters 'fed up' with the incumbent's theatrics and extremism*

By Matthew Kassel

Following a recent string of deadly mass shootings in Uvalde, Texas, and Buffalo, N.Y., Adam Frisch, a Democratic primary candidate in Colorado's 3rd Congressional District, is drawing a sharp contrast on gun control in his campaign to unseat Rep. Lauren Boebert (R-CO) this November.

"Fewer guns make sense," Frisch, 54, said matter-of-factly in an interview with *Jewish Insider*. "I fully support the Second Amendment, but the Second Amendment as the vast majority of people see it as, which is that the Second Amendment doesn't guarantee an assault rifle for a 6-year-old."

Meanwhile, the gun-toting freshman incumbent, who once pledged to carry her Glock to Congress and owns a restaurant called Shooters Grill where servers are encouraged to carry firearms, has aggressively dismissed calls to regulate guns. "You cannot legislate away evil," Boebert said shortly after the shooting at an elementary school in Uvalde last month, while arguing that the U.S. "didn't ban planes" after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Speaking at a Christian event in Colorado Springs a week ago, the congresswoman

also drew headlines when she wondered "how many AR-15s" Jesus "would have had," before answering her own question. "Well," she said, "he didn't have enough to keep his government from killing him."

Unlike Boebert, Frisch said he does not own any guns himself. "I've shot with them. I like them. I've been hunting with friends," he told *JL*. "For me, it's like marijuana. I'm not a user, but I'm fully supportive of people having them. Let's make sure people can hunt as freely as they wish, let's make sure they can do their target practices and recreational gun firing, and let's make sure people have the ability to carry the pistol on their belt."

"That's not the issue," Frisch said. "It is just this extremism that's causing issues."

The gulf between Frisch and Boebert on guns is as wide as the district itself, whose boundaries take in most of the state's Western Slope. And the bet that Frisch is making in his longshot bid to take down Boebert is that his common-sense platform and moderate stance on a range of issues will resonate with voters who are fed up with her theatrics, incendiary rhetoric and support for conspiracy theories.

"There's obviously a lot of pent-up frustration that we have," Frisch said. "She's not even representing the people who voted her into office. It's all about waving a gun and not doing anything else."

The far-right lawmaker had already cemented a reputation for controversy by the time she took office last year after a surprise upset over an entrenched Republican incumbent.

Among other provocations, Boebert had, perhaps most notably, expressed support for the QAnon conspiracy theory, which imagines a secret network of Satanist pedophiles who control the political levers. While Boebert has insisted that she is not a follower of the movement, the congresswoman has continued to amplify some of its claims throughout her first term.

Boebert, 35, has also drawn scrutiny for likening vaccination efforts to Nazism, promoting the "great replacement" theory and suggesting that a Muslim lawmaker, Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN), is a terrorist. In an uncomfortable encounter last January, Boebert raised eyebrows when she questioned whether Jewish visitors at the Capitol were conducting "reconnaissance,"

remarks one observer described as “totally inappropriate.”

Frisch, for his part, says he is fed up with such behavior, and claims that a growing number of voters feel the same. “There are a lot of people who are concerned about Boebert’s extremism,” he told JI. “They’re concerned about her links to QAnon and her links to Marjorie Taylor Greene.”

While in the House, Boebert has formed a close alliance with Greene, the first-term congresswoman from northwest Georgia who has faced criticism for endorsing QAnon, invoking antisemitic tropes and advancing false allegations of voter fraud. Boebert, who has said she is “proud” of voting to overturn the presidential election results, was standing beside Greene last March as she heckled President Joe Biden during a sensitive moment in his State of the Union address.

The political newcomers are among the most high-profile leaders in an emerging coalition of outspoken Republican insurgents who, inspired by former President Donald Trump, adhere to a style of nativist populism that is often more performative than policy-driven. Last week, for instance, Boebert announced the introduction of a bill that would classify fentanyl as a weapon of mass destruction.

Frisch is banking on a suspicion that enough voters have grown tired of Boebert’s antics, even if they had previously welcomed the congresswoman as a refreshingly disruptive counterweight to the Republican status quo just a couple of years ago.

The entrepreneur and former longtime Aspen city councilman maintains that Boebert’s constituents have become increasingly “horrified” by her actions. “Before, they thought she was just kind of a wildcard,” Frisch told JI. “Now, they see her as an embarrassment and a menace to society and a danger.”

His hopes for a general election matchup, he recognizes, are dependent on a couple of outcomes. First, he needs to move past the June 28 primary, where he is facing off against two Democratic opponents: Sol Sandoval, a community organizer viewed as a frontrunner on the activist left, and Alex Walker, a self-described moderate who gained national attention for a questionably scatological campaign ad that one news

outlet characterized as among the more “eye-catching” videos “in recent memory.”

There is no publicly available polling on the race, but Frisch, who identifies as a “pragmatic” moderate, insists he is well-positioned, citing his nearly decade-long run on Aspen’s city council — where he says affordable housing was among his top priorities — as evidence that he is best qualified to replace Boebert.

“We’re making the case that I’m the only one that can defeat her in the general election, and I believe that strongly,” he said. “It goes back to having the experience, a real background in the policies to be able to woo some of these non-Democrats to join our group to get rid of Boebert.”

Frisch, who says on his campaign site that he “runs a residential design and build firm,” has invested heavily in the race, having loaned himself more than \$2.2 million, according to the latest filings from the Federal Election Commission. He has otherwise pulled in \$330,000, lagging behind Sandoval, who has raised more than \$900,000 from individual donors. Walker, at \$250,000, has struggled to keep pace with both candidates.

Frisch, who is Jewish, suggested that Boebert’s conduct — particularly her flirtation with QAnon, a movement “with marked undertones of antisemitism and xenophobia,” according to the Anti-Defamation League — has been personally troubling, even more so amid a recent uptick in racially motivated hate crimes across the country. In Colorado, antisemitic incidents grew by 61% between 2017 to 2021, according to a recent audit conducted by the ADL.

“I think QAnon is an antisemitic and racist organization, and I think she is one of the biggest champions of that,” Frisch said of Boebert. “You don’t have to connect the dots very far to say that I think she has done a lot of antisemitic things, she’s hanging around with a lot of antisemitic organizations, seeks their active support and is fueling a lot of replacement theory conversation.”

Boebert’s campaign did not respond to a request for comment from JI.

Even as Boebert’s statements have elicited backlash on social media and elsewhere, the increased attention, however negative, has also fueled a steady flow of campaign contributions that have

contributed to her status as a prolific fundraiser.

In the Republican primary, Boebert, who has raised approximately \$5 million, is expected to prevail over her sole challenger, state Sen. Don Coram, despite resistance from a feisty political advocacy group, American Muckrakers PAC, that is credited with helping to bring down freshman Rep. Madison Cawthorn (R-NC) in North Carolina’s 11th Congressional District.

The newly launched organization is best known for releasing an explicit video of Cawthorn as part of an effort to damage his reputation in a competitive Republican primary battle last month. But such tactics appear to have backfired last week in Colorado, when American Muckrakers published a news release on its “Fire Boebert” website purporting to reveal that the staunchly pro-life congresswoman once “had two abortions” and worked as an “unlicensed paid escort” — claims she attacked as “blatantly false” in a statement to Fox News Digital.

Boebert’s lawyer, Jonathan Anderson, also denied the charges as “false and defamatory” in a letter threatening legal action and distributed to conservative media outlets last Wednesday.

The allegations, some details of which have been debunked, were widely slammed as bogus, largely because American Muckrakers had failed to procure sufficient documentary evidence beyond screenshots of an exchange with a single anonymous source whose assertions, along with some photos, have yet to be verified.

David Wheeler, a co-founder of American Muckrakers PAC, said in an interview with JI last Wednesday that he was taking “the lawyer letter very seriously,” promising to amend “anything that we determine is not correct.” Still, he stood by the claims and said he was in the process of conferring with his source about the possibility of going public in a press conference this week. “[The source is] pretty pissed off now that everybody’s calling her a liar, and she’s very disappointed and concerned about our reputation,” he said. “We may just out the whole thing. She might be ready.”

Wheeler said he was also working to substantiate at least two other tips that he described as “worse” than the accusations

released last week. “We’ll make news here or not, but anything else that we release we’re going to send to her lawyer first to vet it, and if they can’t come back to us with verifiable evidence, ‘it’s not true,’ then we’re going to publish,” he suggested. “We’ve got a lot.”

Boebert’s attorney did not respond to a request for comment from JI.

American Muckrakers also recently brought allegations that Boebert had misused campaign funds during her 2020 congressional bid to Colorado’s attorney general’s office. The matter is now under investigation by state officials.

Voters, Wheeler insisted, “really need to take a hard look at Lauren Boebert.”

But even if the group produces more convincingly verifiable *kompromat* in the days leading up to next week’s GOP matchup, it remains uncertain as to whether Boebert will suffer at the ballot box. While thousands of Democrats have reportedly switched their party registration to unaffiliated and can now theoretically vote for her opponent in the open primary, the congresswoman has not otherwise seen any simultaneous opposition from Republican state and national leaders of the sort that contributed to Cawthorn’s defeat against a more formidable challenger.

Tyler Sandberg, a Republican consultant in Colorado, predicted that efforts to deny Boebert the nomination would ultimately prove ineffective. “I think a lot of folks on the Western Slope and in Colorado kind of like her non-PC brand,” he told JI. “There are many times that she says things that make Republicans cringe, but she is also tapping into grassroots energy.”

Boebert had more than \$2 million on hand as of June 8, according to the FEC. Coram, by contrast, has pulled in about \$225,000, with only about half of that in the bank.

The congresswoman has “run a significant campaign” and “works the district hard,” according to Sandberg, who surmised that she will have no trouble securing a second term, especially since the newly drawn district lines are now even more favorable for Republican candidates.

Seth Masket, a political scientist at the University of Denver, offered a somewhat more cautious appraisal in a recent email to JI. “If Boebert is going to face any real

difficulty it’s in the primary,” he said. “The district has a Republican lean to it, and she’ll likely have a national Republican trend at her back in the fall.”

While Frisch speculates that Boebert will make it to the general election, he remains confident that he can pull off an upset with backing from what he describes as a coalition of voters who supported her last cycle but have since become disenchanted with the inflammatory behavior that has defined her tenure. “I think the math makes sense,” he said, while acknowledging that “a lot of people are skeptical of it.”

Dick Wadhams, a GOP consultant in Colorado and the former chair of the state Republican Party, is among those who have doubts. “The general perception,” he told JI in a recent email, “is the Republican primary is the only thing that matters.”

Still, Frisch suspects that Boebert is less popular than many experts believe, not least because she failed to win her home county in the 2020 general election and claimed victory with just over 51% of the vote in a district with a plurality of voters who identify as unaffiliated.

As he campaigns throughout a vast swath of rural Colorado that includes such cities as Grand Junction, Durango, Pueblo and his hometown of Aspen, Frisch said he has spoken with a number of constituents from across the political spectrum who voted for Boebert last cycle when she emerged from relative obscurity and shocked the political establishment by unseating five-term Rep. Scott Tipton (R-CO).

“I had Democratic friends who voted for her and a lot of unaffiliated friends who voted for her,” Frisch, who was himself unaffiliated until last December, recalled. “It was part of that whole anti-establishment, let’s-try-something-new, throw-the-bums-out” approach to politics. But voter sentiment has been shifting, he claimed, even within the GOP. “I’m having conversations with a lot of Republicans who are frustrated,” Frisch told JI, “or former Republicans who have gone over to unaffiliated.”

Mendel Mintz, a rabbi who leads the Chabad Jewish Community Center in Aspen, said he has been encouraged to hear from voters in rural areas outside of deep-blue Aspen who have positively reviewed Frisch’s campaign. Such feedback

is particularly meaningful, he suggested, in a district whose estimated Jewish population is only around 2,000, according to a 2014 survey conducted by the Berman Jewish DataBank.

“That makes me proud as a Jew,” Mintz told JI, “and is beautiful to see.” The rabbi said he first came to admire Frisch’s political acumen when he successfully ran for a city council seat more than 10 years ago. “He put himself out there and listened,” Mintz explained. “I remember saying, ‘This guy’s got humility and a desire to put things through.’”

Boebert, on the other hand, “is out there,” Mintz said judiciously, noting that he has never spoken with the congresswoman, who lives an hour’s drive from Aspen in the town of Silt. “There are things to like and not to like.”

Frisch grew up in Minneapolis, where his family attended a Conservative synagogue, and received his undergraduate degree from the University of Colorado Boulder. After college, he “waited tables” in Manhattan before he “fell into finance and banking.” In 2003, Frisch settled in the prosperous resort town of Aspen, where he now lives with his wife, Katy, who serves as president of the local school board, and their two high school-age children.

The first-time congressional hopeful has long been involved in civic and Jewish community life in Aspen. “My view is, the tradition and the teaching of humility are two foundations of why I think religion and Judaism are good, and it’s grounded,” said Frisch, who has served on the board of the Aspen Jewish Congregation, a local Reform synagogue. Frisch, whose two terms on the city council ended in 2019, previously ran for mayor of Aspen before he announced his House bid last February.

“If there was a get-stuff-done party, I’d be in that party,” said Frisch, who hopes to join the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus if he is elected, where he can look forward to working alongside a friend and former high school classmate, Rep. Dean Phillips (D-MN), from his home state of Minnesota.

Frisch is running on a platform that includes protecting reproductive rights, funding education, fighting inflation, conserving environmental resources and promoting gun control, among other things.

“For those who really want to make sure that they have full access to their ability to go hunting, full access to their ability to do recreational target practice and going to the gun ranges, and full access to being able to wear their handgun on their on their waist for safety or pride or whatever it is, I fully support that,” he clarified. “Where the conversation goes haywire, in my mind, is when people have this unrealistic expectation of, this gun equals their entire identity. I think that’s where we get into some issues.”

Frisch said he will take a similarly measured approach to foreign policy matters. He expressed some doubts, for instance, over the Biden administration’s renewed efforts to negotiate a nuclear agreement with Iran, cautioning that the Islamic republic has “continually” demonstrated its disinterest in living up to the deal. “If I think that there is room to push the needle and that we should continue to talk even though I’m seeing skepticism,” Frisch said, “I’m happy to do that.”

“But one of the reasons you might want to just stop negotiating,” he added, “is because there might be a different group of people or a different policy that you want to focus on that is going to bring results for your constituents.”

His main concern when assessing such initiatives as the Iran deal, which has increasingly drawn scrutiny from lawmakers in both parties, is whether they can attract “some type of bipartisan support,” Frisch said. “I don’t want to get

into performative legislation, which is I just want to perform and make my constituents feel good, even though none of it’s going to get done,” he explained, taking a veiled jab at Boebert. “That’s kind of a false sense of what leadership, in my mind, is supposed to be about.”

Instead, Frisch said he is more interested in prioritizing efforts to expand on the Abraham Accords, which established diplomatic relations between Israel and a number of Arab countries that have recently grown closer thanks in part to their shared opposition to Iran. He suggested that such diplomacy could ultimately help contribute to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even as he remains unconvinced that a future deal is in any way imminent, owing to the heated geopolitical dynamics in the region.

Frisch described himself as a staunch supporter of Israel and said he would back continued U.S. security assistance to the Jewish state, among other legislation such as supplemental funding for Israel’s Iron Dome missile-defense system. Frisch first visited Israel years ago, when he attended his sister’s bat mitzvah on Masada, and indicated that he is eager to return as an elected official. He said he envisions a number of opportunities at the state level to encourage bilateral cooperation between Colorado and Israel, including with water conservation and natural resource management.

Such partnerships, Frisch suggested, would also help to neutralize the Boycott,

Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel. “The BDS movement is something I’m concerned about,” he said. “Some of it is ignorance, some of it is antisemitic, but I think some of it is more, I would say, anti-Israel. If you do a Venn diagram and you get into anti-Israel and antisemitic, there’s a lot of overlap, for sure, but there are some parts where it’s not.”

Like every country, Israel should expect “to be poked and prodded on some of their policies,” Frisch said. “No country is perfect. But I do think antisemitism allows it to make it an easier blast at Israel for some of their policies.”

Still, he argued that Israel’s most outspoken critics seem to have ignored the many challenges of persisting as a Jewish state in hostile territory. “It’s really important for us to realize the neighborhood they live in.”

Boebert, for her part, has said she is “absolutely pro-Israel,” even as she has aligned herself with some movements that Frisch believes are antithetical to Jewish interests. “I think there are a lot of direct hardline connections to QAnon being an antisemitic, racist organization,” he reiterated.

“At the end of the day,” Frisch told JI, summarizing his candidacy, “I’m a moderate, pragmatic Jew” who is ultimately running to oppose “a QAnoner in the general election.”

“It’s a story,” he said, “that might resonate with a lot of people who have concerns.” ♦

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## Leaf hints at Abraham Accords expansion surrounding Biden’s Israel, Saudi Arabia trip

*‘I don’t want to get ahead of the president on anything that may figure around his visit, but I can assure you that [normalization] is a piece that we are collectively working on,’ the State Dept. official said*

By Marc Rod

Barbara Leaf, the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, hinted on Wednesday that there may be developments related

to expanding the Abraham Accords during President Joe Biden’s upcoming visit to the Middle East.

“We are working in the space that is not

in the public domain with a couple of other countries,” that do not have preexisting relationships with Israel, “and I think you’ll see some interesting things around the time



of the president's visit," Leaf told the House Foreign Affairs Committee's Middle East, North Africa and global counterterrorism subcommittee.

Biden will arrive in Israel on July 13 for meetings in Israel and the West Bank before traveling on to Saudi Arabia.

Asked by a lawmaker about efforts to normalize relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, Leaf said, "I don't want to get ahead of the president on anything that may figure around his visit, but I can assure you that this is a piece that we are collectively working on."

Leaf emphasized that the administration has also engaged in a range of efforts to build on the existing normalization agreements, highlighting trilateral cooperation with Israel and the United Arab Emirates and a group including four Arab states that met in March at a summit hosted by Israel in the Negev Desert. She said the U.S. is also setting up working groups on issues including water, food security, tourism and health. She added that the administration hopes to further expand these efforts, but said there are no plans to appoint a specific official to handle the matter.

Leaf also said that she spoke with Palestinian leaders during a recent visit to the region about expanding economic cooperation with Israel.

"I think the door is beginning to crack, I'm going to continue to work on this space, because I think the Palestinians owe it to their people to engage in issues like water security, food security, renewables, issues of climate change, even as they work towards an eventual negotiation," Leaf said.

Leaf explained that Palestinian leaders were anxious to ensure that such cooperation would not become a "substitute" for an ultimate political settlement, but said she had given assurances that she would "continue to work very hard" on a two-state solution.

Leaf and Andrew Plitt, the acting assistant administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development's Middle East Bureau, who also testified Wednesday, both defended the U.S.' provision of aid to the Palestinians, which she said was supported by Israel.

"Economic measures and economic hope, do, without question, bring a calm

and a stability to areas that otherwise would pose immense security threats for Israel," she said.

Another major topic of discussion on Wednesday was Iran.

Leaf insisted that the currently stalled nuclear talks with Iran are "not an open-ended, 'till the ends of time situation" and that "there will come a point" where the U.S. cuts off negotiations, at the president's discretion.

She added that there is "a draft that is largely finished — not entirely" of a potential nuclear deal, but that the U.S. is increasing and tightening U.S. sanctions and has "maintained all the sanctions that were put on Iran by the Trump administration."

Leaf also confirmed that talks were derailed by Iran's insistence that the U.S. remove the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps's designation as a Foreign Terrorist Organization — which had been widely reported by not frequently acknowledged publicly by administration officials.

"They inserted a non-nuclear issue into the mix. We said, 'No thanks, unless you're willing to do the sort of things that would allow us to even consider discussing that non-nuclear issue,'" Leaf recounted.

The U.S. is also working with Europeans and regional allies to disrupt financial networks supporting Iranian proxy groups, according to Leaf. And she said the International Atomic Energy Agency board's rebuke of Iran earlier this month "came as an extremely unpleasant surprise to the Iranians. I think they thought they could duck and dodge it. So they are feeling the pressure."

Leaf said that the administration has additionally been engaged in a "long and tortured discussion" as part of efforts to free U.S. citizens held in Iran, adding that there are "some ideas bubbling around" to prevent future detentions, without specifying further.

Rep. Ted Deutch (D-FL), who chairs the subcommittee and opposed the original nuclear deal in 2015, but has largely refrained from commenting on the Biden administration's efforts to renew it, expressed frustration with the administration's approach during Wednesday's hearing.

"I remain concerned that U.S. policy

towards Iran seems to continue to be focused solely on JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action] reentry, as opposed to simultaneously creating a comprehensive strategy that may include a nuclear deal toward countering a long-standing threat that Iran poses to the U.S. [and] our allies and partners," Deutch said, "and I'm eager to hear how the U.S. plans to approach Iran's malign influence in a more comprehensive way."

Deutch later praised the administration for maintaining the IRGC's FTO designation, but urged officials to be more clear in stating publicly that Iran's nuclear activity is unacceptable.

"It's not just Iran's ability to pursue and get closer to nuclear weapons, it ultimately starts to call into question the entire nonproliferation regime and its effectiveness," Deutch said.

He also pushed for further clarity about what would prompt the administration to walk away from the talks, and a "clear articulation now" of "the lines that we will not accept Iran crossing" in the event that JCPOA reentry fails.

Leaf and Plitt were on Capitol Hill to discuss the administration's 2023 budget requests for Middle East-related matters. The administration requested \$7.6 billion for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs — which includes \$3.3 billion in aid to Israel; \$219 million for the Palestinians, \$1.4 billion for Egypt; \$282.5 million for Lebanon, focused on public services and employment; and \$1.45 billion as part of a new Memorandum of Understanding with Jordan, including both civilian economic support and military funding. Overall, the bureau's budget request is a 1.2% drop from the 2021 funding level and less than 1% below the administration's 2022 funding request.

The administration also requested \$50 million to continue the Middle East Partnership for Peace.

USAID's Plitt said the administration will be announcing additional MEPPA awards in the next few weeks, "including a large award on building regional and economic bridges which will have further grants. And that's really meant to make economic linkages between Israelis and Palestinians and really grow... the ability to bring people together behind investments." ♦

# U.S. antisemitism envoy headed to Saudi Arabia in first trip abroad

*Deborah Lipstadt, who also plans to visit Israel and the UAE, said the Gulf monarchy has given her ‘a very warm reception’*

By Gabby Deutch

In a sign of the shifting political climate in the Middle East, Deborah Lipstadt, the U.S.’ special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism, will kick off her first international trip with a visit to Saudi Arabia this weekend, followed by stops in Israel and the United Arab Emirates.

“Saudi Arabia is a very important country in the Gulf. It has shown a willingness and openness to hosting me,” Lipstadt told reporters ahead of the trip’s formal announcement. “We’ve gotten a very warm reception from them.”

Lipstadt plans to meet with government ministers and civil society leaders while in Saudi Arabia, although she did not share details of those she would meet. In Israel, she will “be catching my breath over Shabbat,” meeting U.S. Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides and doing public events with Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. UAE Ambassador to the U.S. Yousef Al Otaiba is helping Lipstadt set up meetings in the UAE — “anything you want,” she said he offered. She had hoped to visit Bahrain but won’t have time this trip, she told reporters.

Saudi Arabia has long faced criticism for its educational curricula that promote hatred against Jews and other religious minorities, as well as women and members of the LGBTQ community. A recent State Department report found that antisemitic material is still publicly circulated in the country, noting that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* were sold at the 2021 Riyadh International Book Fair, organized by the Saudi Culture Ministry. The report also noted that Saudi clerics continue to invoke antisemitic tropes and language in sermons.

Over the past couple of years, Saudi textbooks have begun to dial back that language. The State Department also noted

that the country’s leadership has announced attempts to fight extremism in the country.

“When a country with a long history of, I don’t know what to say, dubious, or colored reactions — you know, mixed reactions, at the best, to Jews and Jewish history says, ‘Come and let’s talk’ ... They know what I want to discuss,” said Lipstadt. “They know what I want to address, so I think it would have been negligent not to have grabbed that.” She likened her work with Saudi Arabia to “pushing against an open door,” adding that it would be “irresponsible” not to visit the country.

Lipstadt insisted that her visit is not political in nature, and that it is not tied to the Biden administration’s stated goal of expanding the Abraham Accords.

“I’m not coming to discuss regional politics,” she said. But in light of “the worldview that’s been created as a result of the Abraham Accords, to talk with them about normalizing the situation of the vision of the Jews, normalizing the understanding of Jewish history for their population, particularly — not only, but particularly their younger population, is really important.”

President Joe Biden is set to travel to Israel, the West Bank and Saudi Arabia just weeks after Lipstadt’s visit. Biden’s trip to Saudi Arabia has been presented by administration officials as an opportunity to reaffirm Washington’s ties with Riyadh, and a way to encourage Saudi Arabia to produce more oil and help lower gas prices.

But administration officials have also stated publicly that they hope to at some point see Israel and Saudi Arabia normalize relations. In a congressional hearing on Wednesday, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf suggested that the president might make announcements on that front while he is in

the region.

“We are engaged with a number of additional countries behind closed doors, and I think around the time of the president’s trip you will see some interesting things,” Leaf said in response to a question about the Abraham Accords.

Lipstadt’s predecessor, Elan Carr, also traveled to the Middle East, where he signed memorandums of understanding with a Moroccan NGO and a Bahraini organization closely tied to the country’s monarchy. But he did not visit Saudi Arabia.

Next month, Lipstadt will depart on another foreign trip, to South America. She will visit Buenos Aires on July 18, the anniversary of the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish center that killed 85 people and wounded hundreds more, and will also stop in Chile.

“I feel it has really not gotten the attention in the Jewish community, much less in the world community, that it so deserves,” she said of the AMIA bombing, “given that it was the biggest — largest number of fatalities at a Jewish institution since the Holocaust.”

U.S. Ambassador to Argentina Marc Stanley has been “very active” in raising the issue of the bombing and its lack of accountability to the Argentine government, said Lipstadt. “It was he, with the Argentinians, who began to push for this to be on my calendar.”

She plans to visit Chile, a country with a small Jewish population, because “the Jewish community feels insecure,” Lipstadt explained, citing a story she heard from one mother whose children were taunted at a mall for wearing the shirt from their Jewish day school. “That’s what antisemitism is.”

Lipstadt hopes to also visit Europe later in the summer. ♦

# Countering rise in hate crimes a ‘top priority,’ says Manhattan DA Alvin Bragg

*Bragg requested \$1.7 million to expand his office’s hate crimes unit, as 2022 incidents have already more than doubled over last year*

By Matthew Kassel

Amid a sharp increase in hate crimes across New York City, Alvin Bragg, the district attorney of Manhattan, is devoting a significant measure of new money and manpower to combat such incidents, which rose by a staggering 160% last year in his borough alone.

Last week, the New York City Council officially approved Bragg’s request for \$1.7 million in funding to expand his office’s hate crimes unit — resources he had described as sorely needed in recent testimony to the legislative body.

There is currently no funding in the city budget dedicated specifically to the Manhattan DA’s hate crimes unit. A separate hate crimes prevention office, created by the City Council in 2019, has received funding but, unlike the DA’s office, has no investigatory purview.

“We made the request because it’s a top priority,” Bragg said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Tuesday. “So we’re going to be prioritizing it.”

The new funding, which will go into effect on July 1, comes after a rocky start for Bragg, who assumed office in January. The political newcomer began his first term amid fierce backlash from critics on both sides of the aisle who, for varying reasons, took turns deriding his approach to criminal justice reform as unreasonably opaque in at least one case and excessively lenient in others.

Even as he has tempered some of his most staunchly progressive policies in recent months — including a controversial vow to seek prison sentences only for the most severe offenses — Bragg, a Democrat, has continued to face scrutiny as well as calls for his ouster from a chorus of hardcore detractors.

The embattled DA gained some much-

needed bipartisan support when the City Council voted to pass its record-breaking \$101 billion budget for the upcoming 2023 fiscal year more than a week ago. Along with funding to bolster the hate crimes unit, Bragg’s office also received more than \$400,000 for its gun violence prevention team.

Bragg had promised to address rising hate crimes when he ran for office last year in a crowded primary to replace Cyrus Vance Jr., whose efforts he had criticized as underwhelming amid an uptick in attacks against Asian Americans, Jews and other minority groups.

In Manhattan, hate crimes rose by 160% in 2021, according to written testimony from the Manhattan DA’s office released in March and provided to the City Council’s Committee on Public Safety as part of the request for more funding. Across the city, such incidents have already more than doubled over last year’s numbers.

Bragg’s office is currently working through a docket of nearly 90 cases, most of which — between 35 and 40% — constitute anti-Asian hate crimes, according to information provided to *JI* by a spokesperson. Hate crimes committed against members of the LGBTQ community make up the second-largest number of cases. The majority of incidents involving the Jewish community, 12 in all, are property crimes, including antisemitic graffiti such as swastikas scrawled onto public establishments.

“The docket is at the most it’s ever had for the unit,” Bragg told *JI*.

Thanks to the new infusion of resources, Bragg is now on the lookout for two full-time deputy chiefs to work exclusively within the hate crimes unit, currently led by Hannah Yu, who has served in the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office since 2014.

In a recent interview, Yu said the work “strikes a personal chord” as the eldest daughter of Korean immigrants. “I grew up being the mouthpiece for my non-English-speaking parents,” she told *JI*. “I think that’s shaped the way I view the world and the way I view victimization and discrimination.”

“If you can’t be free to be who you are and be free in who you love, what God you worship and what community you associate with,” Yu added, “then we’ve got a big problem.”

The funding will also help bankroll a supporting group of investigative analysts, assistant district attorneys, community partnership coordinators and victim services advocates, among others, according to Bragg, who advocates for a holistic approach to the law. “We want to have a hate crimes unit that is staffed not just with lawyers, but also bringing in outreach folks who have language capabilities and cultural sensitivity and competency,” he said.

“The language capabilities are not what we want them to be in the office,” Bragg acknowledged. “I think that is, one, important for investigations, for interviewing witnesses and interviewing victims. It’s also important to get people to come forward and to get them to trust us.”

Bragg, who has described his own personal experiences with police brutality as a kid growing up in Harlem, emphasized that such tools can help foster ties with marginalized groups that have been hesitant to report hate crimes and other bias incidents to law enforcement officials. “People aren’t always necessarily going to come forward to the government,” he told *JI*. “But they’ll come forward to a civic group” or a “community partner.”

“There’s fear and concern about these issues, understandably, and I think engaging with people and letting them know we’re

here has been quite helpful,” Bragg added, stressing that outreach has been ongoing in schools, synagogues and other places during his initial months in office. “In fact, we’ve been told that by groups, and absolutely we want to continue to do it. It’s a work in progress.”

Gideon Taylor, executive vice president of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, said he was encouraged by Bragg’s “commitment” to such advocacy.

“These additional resources for the unit will strengthen the office’s capability to address these awful crimes which undermine our society and weaken our city,” he told JI. “Combating hatred needs both strong law enforcement and also effective programs to bring people closer together. This is not just about attacks on Jews, it is about crimes against all ethnic communities.”

In 2021, the Anti-Defamation League “tracked more antisemitic incidents in Manhattan than anywhere else in New York State,” according to Scott Richman, regional director of the ADL’s New York and New Jersey chapter.

“The DA’s efforts, including, in particular, expanded community engagement and enhanced partnerships with community-based organizations will be critical to addressing the root causes of extremism and hate and providing much-needed support for communities in the wake of these crimes,” Richman said in a statement to JI.

Meanwhile, among the challenges Bragg hopes to address more exhaustively on the investigative side is the often complicated process of establishing a motive, which his office does not “have to prove in almost all other cases,” he told JI.

“With hate crimes, it is an element of the proof necessary to make up a charge,” Bragg explained. “We’re looking at things like social media and email, text messages, things that give us a window into the person’s mind, and not limiting ourselves to whether there’s an exclusive epithet said at the scene.”

Matt Nosanchuk, co-chair of the Jewish Coalition for Criminal Justice Reform and president of the New York Jewish Agenda, a progressive advocacy group, suggested that Bragg’s approach is overdue.

“There hasn’t been enough of a recognition that social media has been serving as a breeding ground or a swamp for hateful views,” he said, adding that the Manhattan DA’s office has “a critical role to play” in the fight against hate crimes.

According to Yu, the hate crimes unit chief, another big component of that fight includes finding alternatives to prosecution such as restorative justice, at least in instances where less punitive measures are deemed suitable for the defendant.

“Restorative justice is certainly part of our holistic approach to resolving our cases,” Yu told JI. The method “requires that both the victim and the defendant want to be across the table from each other,” she explained. “It’s not appropriate for all cases.

We certainly don’t want to re-victimize our victims. But where appropriate, and where both parties are willing to do it, we are all on board.”

The unit also offers an array of other options, including substance abuse programs and mental health court. “We’re certainly working closely right now to expand our education training and programming,” Yu said. “We want to really have a robust bias program that we can refer defendants to.”

“Accountability matters, as does prevention that gets at the root causes — because we can’t simply prosecute our way out of this crisis,” said Amy Spitalnick, executive director of Integrity First for America, the nonprofit behind a recent lawsuit against a group of white supremacists who participated in the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Va. “The expansion of the hate crimes unit marks an important step forward in this fight, going beyond the business-as-usual approach that’s so clearly failed us.”

While the funding has yet to be released, Bragg said he was “in the process” of searching for new candidates from across the office and in other divisions as he seeks to build a unit “that is going to be enduring and fitting these cases.”

“This beautiful island and city we have, we’ve got a lot of talent,” he told JI. “I’m hopeful that we’ll be set up in a matter of months.” ♦

JUNE 19, 2022

## Gas deal bolsters Israel-Egypt industrial ties; help for Europe’s fuel gap limited

*Signing ceremony in Cairo comes as U.S. envoy flies to Beirut to ease tensions over gas fields straddling Lebanese-Israeli maritime border*

By Ruth Marks Eglash

*This article first appeared in The Circuit*

The European Union’s commitment to buy Mediterranean gas through an Israeli-Egyptian partnership will be a boon to the energy industries in both

countries, even if it’s only a fraction of what’s needed to reduce the continent’s dependence on Russian gas.

Following the deal signed in Cairo last week, government officials hailed the commercial and political benefits for Israel and Egypt in working together to export

liquefied natural gas to markets outside the region. Energy analysts noted, though, that it would take years to ramp up supply through the Idku and Damietta liquefaction plants on Egypt’s northern coast and will do little to fill the gaps in gas flow that have hiked Europe’s energy costs since Russia



invaded Ukraine in February.

“On a practical level, Israel is already supplying close to maximum capacity” for its domestic gas needs and the amount sent via an undersea pipeline to Egypt, Amit Mor, chief executive of Eco Energy, an Israeli consulting firm, said in an interview with *The Circuit*. While “nice and symbolic,” he said, the three-way agreement “will not have a significant effect on the gas supply to Europe because it is a relatively small amount.”

While the gas deal has been in the works for several years, said Middle East political risk consultant Ghanem Nuseibeh, “what has happened with the Ukraine crisis is a wake-up call.” That the countries who inked the agreement have realized that they face serious and common challenges has allowed a “shift in geopolitics,” said Nuseibeh, a founder of London-based Cornerstone Global Associates. This has forced previous regional concerns and rivalries to “become of secondary importance compared to the real challenges of energy and food security faced by all the countries,” he said.

The cooperative effort by Egypt and Israel to supply gas to Europe stands in contrast to the saber-rattling between Lebanon and Israel that has flared in recent weeks over deep-water gas fields straddling the two countries’ maritime borders. Just two days before the Cairo ceremony, U.S. energy envoy Amos Hochstein flew to Beirut in an attempt to find a solution to the dispute, which has simmered for years and has threatened to escalate into a military confrontation.

The tensions with Lebanon had little visible impact on the European gas deal with Egypt and Israel, which was praised for its potential to help all three parties.

“This is a tremendous moment in which little Israel becomes a significant player in the global energy market,” Israeli Energy Minister Karin Elharrar said at the June 15 signing of a memorandum of understanding between the European Union and the two countries. It took place at a meeting of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, which also includes Greece, Cyprus, France, Italy, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority.

Egyptian Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources Tarek El Molla called the deal an “important milestone,” adding

that it would “strengthen relations between our region and Europe, and I think further collaboration will come between member countries of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum.” Despite having signed a peace agreement 43 years ago, Egypt and Israel have never enjoyed warm relations.

Also known as the EastMed Forum, the group formed in 2019 to bring together countries in the Eastern Mediterranean basin and aims to promote cooperation in a region rich with deep-sea gas reserves. The agreement signed with the EU not only increases the market for that gas, it also encourages European companies to participate in further exploration.

Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, also signed the agreement in Cairo and later tweeted, “This will contribute to our energy security. And we are building infrastructure fit for renewables — the energy of the future.”

A day before the signing, von der Leyen, during a stop in Jerusalem, pointed to Europe’s pressing fuel needs after a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. “With the beginning of this war and the attempt of Russia to blackmail us through energy, by deliberately cutting off the energy supplies, we decided to cut off and to get rid of the dependency on Russian fossil fuels, and to move away from Russia and diversify to trustworthy suppliers,” she said.

The discovery of the offshore Leviathan and Tamar gas fields in the Mediterranean over the past two decades has been a stunning development for the Israeli gas industry. Among international companies that may benefit from the European agreement with Israel and Egypt are Chevron Corp., Shell Plc and TotalEnergies SE, according to *Bloomberg*, citing a note to investors by analysts at Barclays Plc. All three companies have stakes in gas projects in Israel or Egypt.

The Tamar field has also become one of the banner stories of the Gulf-Israel normalization pact known as the Abraham Accords. Abu Dhabi’s Mubadala Petroleum bought a 22% stake in the exploration project last year for about \$1 billion, the largest deal since the Accords were signed at the White House in September 2020.

For Israel’s former minister of energy, Yuval Steinitz, who was instrumental

in establishing the EastMed Forum and instigating Israel’s previous gas deals with Egypt and another with Jordan, the EU deal ratified the regional importance of the gas discoveries. He said that the partnerships in the field of energy are “the first significant economic cooperation” between Israel and Egypt since the 1979 Camp David Accords, and between Israel and Jordan, which made peace in 1994.

Steinitz, who was energy minister between 2015 and 2021, said he was confident that other Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and the Emirates would soon join the EastMed Forum as observer countries and also that said contracts originated when he was energy minister have already generated some \$30 billion. Their value is likely to triple in the near future, he said.

Among the projects undertaken by the EastMed Forum is the construction of an underwater pipeline that would be able to transfer even larger amounts of natural gas from Israel and the region directly to Europe without first needing to be liquefied. Although previously approved by the member countries, including with the backing of the two previous U.S. administrations, the project has stalled in the last six months after President Joe Biden withdrew his support over environmental concerns.

“This is a clear mistake,” Steinitz told *The Circuit*. “I don’t know why this evaporated in the last half-year. It is rational and reasonable to build such a pipe if you want Israel and Cyprus to become substantial suppliers of gas to Europe.”

Shai Bazak, CEO of ELNET, a non-government organization that works to strengthen the relationship between Israel and Europe, also said the energy issue “is one of the most important areas for collaboration.”

“We knew it would come up even before the war [in Ukraine],” said Bazak, who served as former Israeli Prime Benjamin Netanyahu’s spokesman in the 1990s.

“Selling gas gives Israel a place at the table in the Middle East,” Bazak said, noting that the European Union is Israel’s top trading partner. “The energy issue is part of the geopolitical arena and gives us more strength.”

Despite the reassuring display of

peaceful collaboration between Egypt and Israel, the dispute over gas with Lebanon remains, with the potential for igniting military confrontation in the region.

The dispute involves an 840-square-kilometer (325-square-mile) swath of Mediterranean Sea off the two country's coasts. Previous efforts to resolve the problem stalled two years ago when Lebanon changed its demands, asserting that its previous maritime map needed modifying.

Tensions flared again earlier this month when a vessel belonging to Greek-British gas company Energean arrived in the area to develop Karish, one of Israel's three operational gas fields. Lebanese leaders charged that the floating rig was operating in

disputed waters, which drew unprecedented threats from Hezbollah, the militant Islamist group that dominates Lebanese politics and is a designated terrorist organization.

Sarit Zehavi, CEO and founder of the Alma Education and Research Center, which focuses on Israel's security challenges on its northern border, said the visit by Hochstein, the U.S. special envoy, appeared to have calmed tensions. She said Lebanese anger towards Israel stemmed most likely from internal politics than from any legitimate claim to the area where Karish is located.

Lebanon's President Michel Aoun and its prime minister, Najib Mikati, both warned Israel against drilling in the offshore natural gas field, with Mikati, according to *Reuters*, accusing Israel of "encroaching on

Lebanon's maritime wealth, and imposing a fait accompli in a disputed area."

Steinitz, who oversaw the last round of negotiations with Lebanon when he was minister, pointed out that the Karish field was far from the area under dispute. He said the most recent blow-up was probably because Lebanon, which is in a severe economic crisis, has not been able to find its own gas in the area. He noted that international companies have resisted working off the Lebanese coast because of the dispute with Israel.

However, added Steinitz, because Lebanon is in the same geological area as Egypt, Israel and Cyprus, which all have discovered gas, "it is very likely that there is also gas in Lebanese waters." ♦

JUNE 22, 2022

## Musk, oil prices, soccer dominate stage at Qatar Economic Forum

*Tesla tycoon says \$44 billion Twitter deal still pending because of 'unresolved' debt issues, sees near-term recession as 'more likely than not'*

By Jonathan H. Ferziger

*This article first appeared in The Circuit*

**H**eads of state, oil executives and the richest man in the world pondered the prospects for a U.S. recession this week during the Qatar Economic Forum.

The three-day conference in the capital city of Doha, which concluded on Wednesday, focused on matters ranging from the global economic slowdown and escalating crude prices to whether Qatar can rustle up enough beds to handle 1.2 million ticket-holders for soccer's 2022 World Cup in November.

Elon Musk, however, stole the show when he injected new uncertainty into the question of whether he will ultimately buy Twitter and talked about where he's spending other portions of his \$220 billion personal fortune.

Musk, the 50-year-old chief executive of electric carmaker Tesla and rocket company SpaceX, said there were still "unresolved matters" holding up his \$44 billion bid for

the popular social media platform.

"There is the question of will the debt portion of the round come together and then will the shareholders vote in favor," he said in an interview on Tuesday with John Micklethwait, editor-in-chief of Bloomberg News, who was onstage in Qatar while Musk was in the U.S. talking by video feed.

Asked about the U.S. economy, Musk said a recession is inevitable and outlined the job cuts he's ordered at Tesla that will reduce the salaried workforce by 10%. "As to whether there is a recession in the near-term, that is more likely than not."

Bloomberg LP was media sponsor of the conference, which was streamed live on its website. The company's billionaire founder, former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, delivered opening remarks alongside the emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. The event was underwritten by the Qatari government.

Among Musk's backers in his bid for Twitter is Qatar Holding LLC, which committed to invest \$375 million. The

company is owned by the Qatar Investment Authority, the country's sovereign wealth fund.

Also onstage was ExxonMobil CEO Darren Woods, who said oil companies will need three to five years to "catch up" on the investments required to assure adequate world supply. He spoke on a panel with Qatari Energy Minister Saad Al-Kaabi, with whom he also signed an investment agreement to take a 6.25% stake in Qatar's \$29 million North Field liquefied natural gas project.

Other heads of state who participated in the forum were Rwandan President Paul Kagame, Namibian President Hage Geingob and Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart K. Tokayev.

The conference ended Wednesday with appearances by Gianni Infantino, president of the World Cup's governing body FIFA, and the Qatari government's chief organizer for the tournament, Hassan Al-Thawadi. Qatar, which does not have nearly enough hotel beds for the expected crowds, plans to

bring cruise ships, pitch Bedouin tents in the desert and run shuttle flights to nearby Gulf states to handle the onslaught of fans.

Asked whether Qatar is prepared, Al-Thawadi said, “We’re more or less there.” ♦

JUNE 21, 2022

# Israeli government collapse disrupts domestic agenda, diplomatic efforts

*Much of Israel’s foreign policy is likely to remain unchanged, while domestic issues will be most affected by the leadership change, analysts told JI*

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett’s surprise announcement Monday night that he will disperse his increasingly disunified coalition after just over one year in office sent Israel’s political sphere into a tailspin.

Standing beside his political partner, Alternate Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, Bennett informed Israelis in a televised statement that dissolving the government, which he said had made progress in a broad range of domestic and foreign areas, was a “difficult moment, but it was the right decision for the State of Israel.”

The announcement, however, cast uncertainty on how the interim government might function in dealing with immediate and sensitive issues as the country heads into its fifth election cycle in less than four years.

While Bennett’s government saw some successes domestically, including passing a state budget for 2022, there are looming issues, such as the annual budget for 2023, the health, economic and social fallout from the continuing COVID-19 pandemic and the skyrocketing cost of living.

In addition, there are key foreign policy issues that need to be dealt with amid a transition in political leadership: the upcoming visit to Israel by President Joe Biden next month, as well as tensions with Iran, which have taken center stage in recent weeks amid credible threats to abduct Israelis traveling to Turkey.

A joint statement released by Bennett and Lapid on Monday said the two will submit a bill to Israel’s parliament to dissolve the government. The initial vote could come

as soon as tomorrow, but the process might take longer. An election is expected to take place on Oct. 25. During the election period, Lapid will replace Bennett as interim prime minister and Bennett will take on the role of alternate prime minister, handling the Iran portfolio.

Lapid will continue on as foreign minister and deal with the bulk of foreign policy matters, including greeting Biden when he visits Israel on July 13. U.S. Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides said on Monday that Biden’s trip “will happen as planned.”

“The president’s visit is going ahead on schedule,” Shalom Lipner, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, told *Jewish Insider*. “The president has stated that he is coming to see the people of Israel so I wouldn’t expect any changes. For both the president and whoever is in the prime minister’s office, this visit will serve mutual interests. I would also anticipate the continuation of the current government’s engagement with the administration, airing any disagreements in private.”

Lipner, who spent nearly three decades working in the Prime Minister’s Office, said that while “the transitional government will not be able to pass any important legislation like the 2023 budget, it will have a freer hand to govern without the constant threat of no-confidence motions or Knesset members threatening to topple it.”

“On the other hand, election campaigning will present the new challenge of preventing politics from determining policy,” he said.

The disarray in Israel and its uncertain political future may have an impact, however, on how the country is viewed from the outside. Reports that Biden’s visit

to the region, which includes a stop in Saudi Arabia, could bring the two Middle East countries closer to normalizing ties may be put on hold until there is more political stability in Israel.

Any hopes for restarting a peace process between Israel and the Palestinians will also need to wait until it is clear who will sit in the prime minister’s seat. And technical processes, such as Israel’s attempts to join America’s Visa Waiver Program, which will exempt Israelis from stringent visa requirements, will now slow down.

“Israel’s Iran policy will remain unchanged,” commented Lipner, adding, “The normalization process of the Abraham Accords is also a matter of consensus in Israel, and the fundamentals on the Palestinian track will not change either.”

Lipner noted that joining the Visa Waiver Program is likely to remain a goal for future Israeli governments, but “at the end of the day there is a technical question of who will shepherd it forward.”

“We won’t see a regression if Washington remains engaged and if whoever emerges [from these elections] are equally as interested in making it a success,” he said.

Yohanan Plesner, president of the Israel Democracy Institute, said that the political instability of the past three and a half years had made it difficult to persevere in the domestic arena, but when it comes to foreign policy, he said, “we have seen continuity.”

“The main security issues on the agenda are not largely contentious or controversial and that is why nothing much will change,” said Plesner, adding that matters such as developing and broadening the Abraham Accords and efforts to curtail Iranian

aggression, which are led by the defense establishment, are “largely supported and nothing will change.”

“Fortunately, we had a government that

functioned very well for most of the past year, and this meant that key nominations of professionals in the civil service were filled, the budget was passed and it bought

time and oxygen before we dive into a new chapter in the political crisis,” Plesner concluded. ♦

JUNE 21, 2022

# Israeli political shake-up sends country to fall elections

*Prime Minister Naftali Bennett announced that the coalition government will dissolve in the coming days following weeks of turmoil*

By Marc Rod Miller

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett’s announcement on Monday that the government will dissolve and head for new elections caught few observers off-guard, following weeks of political uncertainty amid a spate of defections that left Bennett’s coalition government in the minority.

The always-tenuous coalition government has teetered for months, experts on the region noted, following Knesset Member Idit Silman’s resignation from the coalition in April.

“I don’t think this news should come as a real surprise to people who’ve been paying attention, because once you started having these defections, anything could have blown it apart,” Susie Gelman, board chair of the Israel Policy Forum, told *Jewish Insider*.

The proximate trigger for the government’s collapse, analysts explained, was the Knesset’s failure last week to pass a bill extending Israeli law to settlers in the West Bank, a policy that has been in effect consistently since 1967.

Some right-wing lawmakers who support the policy but are aligned with former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, voted against the bill as part of an effort to scuttle the coalition government, joining left-wing and Arab lawmakers — a situation that David Makovsky, the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, described as “surrealistic.”

Rob Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute, added that Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid — who will take over as prime minister until a new government is formed — likely decided it

would be preferable to dissolve the coalition on their own terms and organize elections at a time of their choosing rather than “continue the water torture” of a continually eroding coalition.

“The pressure was coming like a pincer movement from both edges of the coalition,” Makovsky said. “It was just not a tenable situation.”

Bennett may have determined that it was preferable for him not to be prime minister at the time of the coming election, allowing him to focus on reinforcing his support among his base, while Lapid will now have the opportunity to prove himself capable of leading the country, Satloff said.

Recent terror attacks, in which more than a dozen Israelis were killed, were “the straw that broke the camel’s back,” Makovsky said, noting that terror attacks have historically pushed Israelis to the right. The attacks coincided with a campaign of “intimidation” from right-wing members of the opposition targeting members of the coalition.

The coalition collapsed under “the sheer weight of contradictions and anomalies inherent within it,” explained Aaron David Miller, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Given the odds arrayed against it, Miller said that the coalition had “fared remarkably well” and “lasted longer than many would have imagined.”

Satloff praised the government for achieving “some laudable results” including approving a budget, “breaking the barrier on Arab participation in Israeli government,” handling ongoing Palestinian tensions and terrorism and organizing the Negev Summit

with Arab and U.S. allies.

But, Makovsky noted, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict proved to be an “inescapable” obstacle.

“That’s what this experiment was facing. The premise was, ‘We don’t agree on the conflict, but we can agree on everything else,’” he said. “But what you found is you couldn’t totally ignore this issue. And it would bite you.”

Netanyahu’s Likud party is likely to again emerge as the largest party in the Knesset, according to Satloff, but, as in previous elections, Netanyahu will need to bring together 61 votes to form a coalition, something had failed to do in several previous rounds of elections.

Despite the attacks from Netanyahu’s opposition coalition linking MK Mansour Abbas and the Ra’am party he leads to Hamas terrorists, analysts did not dismiss the possibility that Abbas and his cohort might join a future Netanyahu-led coalition. Netanyahu had previously courted Abbas in his own efforts to form a government.

“It’s certainly possible for the ultra-Orthodox to sit with Mansour Abbas,” Miller said. “And you can’t rule out Abbas’s determination to remain on the inside and at least get a piece of the pie.”

The key question to emerge from this coalition is whether Arab parties can be included in future governing coalitions or this government will go down as a failed experiment, according to Makovsky.

Satloff argued, “you can’t undo the fact that Mansour Abbas’s party was in this government.”

Gelman was skeptical about the future of



Arab parties in government.

"I hope [the dissolution of the coalition] doesn't mean that all that is for naught and that you will never have an Israeli Arab party in a coalition government again, but I would hasten to add that for the foreseeable future, that's extremely unlikely," she said. "The trends are not in that direction at all."

Satloff described the coalition government as an effort to "transition" from the Netanyahu era to "something else," but warned against "ascrib[ing] great historical forces at work to the dissolution of this government."

Now, he continued, members of the coalition will need to "make the case not just why such a government existed and survived, but why their party deserves to survive into the next Knesset and potentially to the next government. And that's a much more ideological argument... It'll be quite a challenge for some of the members of this government, especially Prime Minister Bennett, who lost considerable support among his right wing base."

The sea change in Israel is unlikely to impact President Joe Biden's upcoming visit to the region next month, which is set to include a stop in Israel.

"The trip is definitely going to happen because, as you know, the trip is as much about Saudi Arabia as anything else, probably more so," Gelman said.

Satloff said the change in government "will trigger some shuffling, some rethinking of the optics of the visit, but by and large this doesn't have a huge impact."

"From the Biden administration's perspective, this may provide an opportunity for a little bit more leeway of discussion on the Palestinian issue given that Lapid is less allergic than Bennett to discussing the question of a political horizon," he said. "I don't think there will be a substantial change. While Lapid may be to the left of Bennett, remember that we're now in an Israeli election campaign, and so everything will be viewed through that lens."

Miller noted that the Biden visit could potentially be a boon to Lapid. "Photo ops, Lapid and Biden, Yad Vashem, whatever else is on the agenda for Biden and Lapid will play to Lapid's strength," he explained. "And if the Saudi-Israeli normalization process goes forward... that will redound to

the caretaker government's credit."

But a renewed agreement with Iran over its nuclear program — while currently unlikely — would give Netanyahu "a huge edge on which to run," Miller said. And if Biden is seen to be "tipping his hand toward Lapid or undertaking things that clearly benefit a caretaker government," Netanyahu might increasingly frame his campaign as being anti-Biden.

Satloff was skeptical that Netanyahu would openly attack Biden, calling such a move "risky" given that U.S.-Israel ties have traditionally been important to Israeli voters and "Joe Biden is viewed as a strong friend of Israel."

Depending on the timing of the elections, dynamics could be shaped in part by the outcome of the U.S. midterm elections, Makovsky said. Should Republicans retake Congress, Netanyahu might take a more partisan line. If the Israeli elections take place before the midterms, Netanyahu might "play it more safe."

Miller called the government's collapse "a bad sign" for the long-term future of U.S.-Israel relations and Israel's relationship with the U.S. Jewish community, which he said had improved overall under Bennett. He said the situation could turn positive if Lapid manages to form a new, centrist or center-left coalition without some of the further right and religious forces in the current government.

"If it doesn't turn out that way, and Netanyahu returns to office, I think that all of the trend lines that appeared to be more positive... all of that is going to revert to a situation where the U.S.-Israeli relationship — [which is] powered by the critical importance of bipartisanship — is going to get once again ground up in American partisan politics."

Satloff urged against "read[ing] too much into" the long-term significance of the government for the U.S.-Israel relationship.

Analysts were dubious that Lapid will have much capacity to effect change as head of the caretaker government, particularly as he seeks to avoid further alienating right-wing forces ahead of the election.

"Historically, during an election period, everything freezes when it comes to the Palestinian issue," Makovsky said, "because there's no [incentive] in it for politicians

to make any major moves." The coalition, having lost its majority, will also be unable to pass any legislation.

Gelman speculated that the failure of the settlement bill could prompt renewed discussion about annexing areas of the West Bank, a move that was halted in 2020 as a condition of the Abraham Accords. The bill's failure, she said, may highlight that the settlements are not a full and permanent part of Israel.

Satloff noted that Lapid will remain prime minister until a new government is formed, a process which could stretch into next year.

"It's not an insignificant period of time," he said. "There will be restrictions on what the government can do because it's the caretaker government. But you're going to see perhaps a slight more centrist approach on some issues, because of the difference between the two, but you'll probably see a lot of continuity." ♦

# Supreme Court strikes down restrictions on public funding of religious schools

*The Supreme Court ruled that Maine cannot exclude religious schools from a program that gives private school funding to parents in areas without public schools*

By Marc Rod

**T**he Supreme Court ruled on Tuesday against restrictions excluding religious schools from programs that allow public funding of private schools, the latest in a series of victories for religious schooling advocates at the high court in recent years.

*Carson v. Makin* hinged on a Maine law that provided families in rural areas without local public schools with funding to attend private schools or nearby public schools, but excluded “sectarian” schools. The court struck down this restriction in a 6-3 decision authored by Chief Justice John Roberts, with the court’s three liberals dissenting.

“The State pays for tuition for certain students at private schools — so long as the schools are not religious. That is discrimination against religion,” Roberts wrote. “Regardless of how the benefit and restriction are described, the program operates to identify and exclude otherwise eligible schools on the basis of their religious exercise.”

The decision was hailed by a range of Jewish groups — including the Orthodox Union, National Jewish Commission on Law and Public Affairs (COLPA), Agudath Israel of America, National Council of Young Israel and Jewish Coalition for Religious Liberty (JCRL) — that had filed amicus briefs supporting such an outcome.

“Today’s ruling by the Supreme Court is the culmination of decades of determined advocacy by the Orthodox Union and our partners,” Nathan Diament, the Orthodox Union’s executive director for public policy, said in a statement. “The essential promise of the First Amendment’s religion clause is to guarantee religious freedom in the United States by requiring government neutrality toward religion. A state discriminating against religion — as Maine did in its

tuition assistance program — is just as unconstitutional as a state promoting one particular religion.”

Rabbi Abba Cohen, Agudath Israel’s vice president for government affairs, said in a statement that the ruling should allow other states with provisions in their state constitutions blocking aid to religious organizations to “effectively feel free to now enact programs that encourage or provide assistance to religious schools on an equal basis with other nonpublic schools.”

In his dissent, Justice Stephen Breyer argued that, under the court’s ruling, the state would be in effect paying ministers to “teach the practice of religion” to children, and wrote, “The Establishment Clause was intended to keep the State out of this area.”

In a separate dissent, Justice Sonia Sotomayor added that the decision “requires Maine to fund what many of its citizens believe to be discrimination of other kinds” — the schools in question in the case explicitly discriminate against applicants and teachers on the basis of religion and sexual orientation. “Today, the court leads us to a place where separation of church and state becomes a constitutional violation,” Sotomayor continued.

Other Jewish groups such as the Anti-Defamation League, National Council of Jewish Women, Union for Reform Judaism and Women of Reform Judaism supported upholding the Maine law.

“We are deeply concerned by today’s Supreme Court decision in *Carson v. Makin*. It marks the first time the Court has held that a state must pay for religious education as part of a tuition program meant to provide free public education for all,” ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt told JI. “This ruling undermines the core principle of church-state separation and sets a dangerous precedent. We believe it opens the door to

taxpayer-funded schools and programs that deny admission to religious and other minorities, and potentially state-funded religious indoctrination.”

In previous recent cases, the court had drawn distinctions between religious institutions that receive public funding for secular projects — a playground, in one case — and schools that use public funding for religious purposes, such as religious instruction. That distinction, known as the status/use distinction, has been “slammed shut and locked” in Tuesday’s ruling, according to Howard Slugh, the general counsel for JCRL.

“The Free Exercise Clause was supposed to prevent the government from stopping you in your religious practice. It was not meant to require the government to fund it,” said Caroline Mala Corbin, a law professor at the University of Miami specializing in the First Amendment’s speech and religion clauses who disagreed with the Supreme Court’s ruling. “The vast majority of private religious schools are Christian religious schools... [Taxpayer] money will be used to pay for Christian indoctrination, and this is exactly what the Establishment Clause was supposed to protect against.”

Diament argued that the “status/use distinction is in itself, harmful” because it can be difficult to parse what activities are performed because of religious beliefs.

In his dissent, Breyer raised concerns that the *Carson* decision could be interpreted to mean that any school district that pays for public schools must also provide funding to parents who wish to send their children to religious schools instead.

“We have never previously held what the Court holds today, namely, that a State *must* (not *may*) use state funds to pay for religious education as part of a tuition program designed to ensure the provision

of free statewide public school education,” he argued.

Roberts argued that Breyer misinterpreted his decision.

“The dissidents are wrong to say that under our decision today Maine ‘must’ fund religious education,” Roberts said in his opinion.

Observers on both sides of the debate generally agreed that the majority opinion did not necessarily mandate public funding of religious education in any case where public schooling is provided.

“I see that as frivolous to be quite honest,” said Slugh. “There’s a clear distinction between the state saying, ‘We’ll only fund public schools,’ and the state saying, ‘We’ll fund some private schools but not others.’ I think it’s very easy to draw a line for a state and say the only schools we’re going to fund are our own public schools.”

“I do not think this decision requires that outcome,” Corbin agreed. “For government to have a rule that taxpayer money will only be used for public education does not have that same problem of discriminating against religion... It’s certainly conceivable that a later decision will move away from the stopping point this one [sets], but this one does have a stopping point.”

Tuesday’s decision stopped short of fulfilling the hopes set out in the COLPA brief, which called for the Supreme Court to overturn the 1971 decision in *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, where the court established a test to decide whether laws concerning religion are discriminatory. Some religious liberty advocates argue the “Lemon test” permits for discrimination.

Slugh noted that the Maine decision is the latest in a series that have moved “very far” from *Lemon*, although the Court has repeatedly avoided directly striking down *Lemon*. He argued that overruling *Lemon* would “prevent the confusion” that has prompted cases like *Carson*.

Nathan Lewin, a seasoned constitutional lawyer who helped author the COLPA brief, said that *Lemon* has not been directly challenged in any case, but he believes the “court is moving in that direction,” albeit slowly.

“I didn’t think the court was going to use this case to overrule *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, but I wanted to push that idea in their heads for

purposes of future litigation,” Lewin said. He said that overruling the precedent would be “logically... the next step.” ♦