

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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MAY 18, 2023

Naftali Bennett's big bet

Despite an Israel riven with divisions, a relaxed former prime minister sees 'many years of unity governments' ahead. Will he be a part of them?

By Melissa Weiss

In recent months, Naftali Bennett has met with members of Congress, sat for a one-on-one meeting with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Abu Dhabi and appeared on major American networks defending Israel's recent operation in the Gaza Strip.

But Bennett, 51, is no longer Israel's leader. He's not even in the government.

"The passion of my life, beyond my core family, is the State of Israel," Bennett told *Jewish Insider* in a wide-ranging interview at his home in Ra'anana earlier this month. "That's what I care about. God bless, I've been successful in business and money has never been a driver... I don't care about

material stuff. I care about the State of Israel and the Jewish people."

Bennett was quiet in the months after the collapse of his unity government, which had surprised observers at the time of its creation for its inclusion of both right-wing Jewish parties, such as Bennett's Yamina, and the Islamist Ra'am party led by MK Mansour Abbas. But the coalition's diversity was also its weakness, and eventually its downfall: Discontent with some of the government's moves, MK Idit Silman, a member of Bennett's own party, quit the coalition, sparking a domino effect of departures that brought down the government, triggering the November

election that saw Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu resume power. Silman was rewarded by Netanyahu and now serves as minister of environmental protection.

Now, nearly a year later, Bennett has begun speaking publicly — to Jewish groups, elected officials and media outlets, among others — about issues ranging from his vision for the future of Israel to the high-tech sector.

No longer flanked by aides, Bennett, clad in a dark blue shirt and black slacks on the day of the interview, opens the door and welcomes visitors to his still-heavily guarded home set on a quiet street in the middle of the small city. The family dog trots

around the house. Once settled on his back patio, Bennett sips water as he speaks about his time in the Prime Minister's Office.

"What I am preaching is for an era of unity and using the 70% rule that I coined, which is 70% of the people agree on 70% of the issues," Bennett explained. "You know, we need better education, less traffic jams, lower costs. And they disagree on 30% of the contentious issues. So let's focus on the 70% and shelve for a while the 30%. We don't have to solve all problems. And what I'm preaching for is unity, or even a lower goal of respecting each other and being able to keep the Zionist project together."

A united government, he said, is "really the only way forward."

"I think in the short term, over the next year or two, we're going to go through a tough period, which we're going through right now," Bennett said. "After which I think the big lesson that's going to be imprinted on the minds and hearts of Israelis is that we have to be together, a bit similar to what was imprinted during [the] Oslo [Accords]: that we can't tear up the land of Israel, we can't divide it. So now the big lesson is we can't divide the people of Israel."

During Israel's five-day military operation in Gaza this month, Bennett appeared on CNN, where he pushed back on an interviewer's claims that Israel targeted civilians in its strikes on weapons depots. "There's no method that is more cowardly" than Palestinian Islamic Jihad's use of children as human shields, Bennett told anchor Isa Suares. "Shame on them," he added.

Bennett spoke to JI before the military operation, but hours after Palestinian Islamic Jihad fired several rockets into Israel, about his efforts to improve daily life for Gazans. While prime minister, he greenlit thousands of work permits for Gazans to enter Israel, despite pushback from the Shin Bet, Israel's security service. Starting with 2,000 permits, the government had issued 20,000 permits by the time of its collapse.

"My supreme interest is Israel's national security. The bottom line is [that] it provided — and still provides — a huge incentive to not go to war and not shoot rockets at Israel,"

Bennett said before ticking off the numbers.

A Gazan working in Israel, he explained, earns 10 times more than a Gazan working in the Strip, and bears the financial responsibility of supporting, on average, three and a half families. Each family, Bennett suggested, consists of five to six people. With 20,000 permits issued, he suggested, 70,000 families — or over 400,000 people — benefit from the earnings.

"That's about almost a quarter of the people in Gaza [who] are directly impacted positively by those folks who work in Israel," he said. "It immediately raises their standards of living. And then Hamas, when Hamas fiddles with the idea of shooting rockets, it thinks 1,000 times before, because contrary to what people think, Hamas does have to consider public opinion in Gaza and our folks just simply say, 'Don't mess with our livelihoods.'"

The calculations may have paid off: Hamas sat out the latest skirmishes between Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Israel.

When he became prime minister in June 2021, Bennett said, he asked civil administration authorities for a list of measures that could be taken to improve life for the Palestinians.

"My point is to quantify and to measure and to see what are all the areas [in which] Palestinian people are paying some price for no good reason, and just remove them and make their lives better," he said. "It's not going to be perfect. I'm not able to provide them [with] their full dreams of a Palestinian state, etc. But that doesn't mean I don't do anything."

Bennett, whose early success came from the tech world, brought a business-like atmosphere to the Prime Minister's Office. But before he started his first company, he was a soldier in the IDF's Sayeret Matkal special reconnaissance unit who was at times stationed in Israel's north.

It was during that time, he told JI, that he studied for Israel's Psychometric Entrance Test (PET). Bennett scored a 776 out of 800 on the exam, he confirmed to JI.

After leaving the army, Bennett, whose parents were Americans who made aliyah, moved to the U.S., where he started Cyota,

his first tech company, eventually selling the business for \$145 million. The lessons he learned in the business world and military would come in handy in the Prime Minister's Office.

"He ran [the Prime Minister's Office] both like a business, but also like a war room in the military," one former staffer told JI. "He was personally involved in the things that mattered the most. And [for] the most critical of issues, he would open a WhatsApp group and make sure that he was overseeing the issue and how it was being dealt with."

On one occasion in early 2022, the staffer recalled, a team assembled to discuss how to deal with the influx of Ukrainians following the Russian invasion of their country, many of them eligible for citizenship under Israel's Law of Return, attempting to come to Israel. A hotline had been set up, someone in the room had told him, for Ukrainians to call and receive information on immigrating to Israel.

"He wasn't satisfied with just hearing answers. So he asked for his personal aide to bring in his phone and he asked for them to give him the number, and he called the hotline the Jews in Ukraine should call if they need to make aliyah. He went through the whole process himself and he noticed that they didn't have an option available in Ukrainian, and then the wait time was too long," the former staffer recalled. "He was very, very practical with his approach and he knew that the most important thing at this time, this whole operation, is the accessibility of this one phone number to these Jews who are in danger."

Part of Bennett's practicality was in building the broadest ideological coalition in Israeli history, which included Abbas' Ra'am party. When Bennett was named to *Time* magazine's list of the 100 most influential people in the world in 2021, Abbas penned the accompanying text.

"In the end, it all comes down to courage," Abbas wrote. "After four elections in two years, a bold act was needed to unite a country frayed by political stalemate and brought to a desperate standstill. Something dramatic needed to change, but more importantly, someone courageous needed

to make that change. Naftali Bennett threw himself into a political firestorm in order to forge previously unimaginable ties between Israel's left and right, Arabs and Jews, religious and secular. He formed one of the most diverse governments in Israel's history."

Abbas' warm feelings are reciprocated.

"I believe then, and now [I] believe more, that Mansour Abbas is a unique leader, unprecedented within Israel," Bennett told JI. "I would call him the Israeli [Anwar] Sadat, because he, with immense personal courage, he is taking a stand that is highly risky politically, and more than just politically. He's taking personal risk. And his message is loud and clear: 'Israel is a Jewish and democratic state. I get it. I want the Arabs to integrate to be part and parcel of the economy, society.... and I vehemently oppose terror.' Now, I couldn't say that everyone around him is there yet, but it's a process and from [the standpoint of] a leader of Israel, what we need to do is embrace him and prove him right."

Netanyahu had considered forming an alliance with Ra'am in 2021, which, Abbas later said, gave legitimacy to including his party in a governing coalition. But Ra'am is not a part of Netanyahu's current government, considered to be one of the most right-wing coalitions in Israeli history.

By "isolating" Abbas, Bennett said, the current government is laying the groundwork to get "more of the [Ta'al party leader] Ahmad Tibis, and of those who don't accept Israel as a Jewish state."

"Why would you do that?" Bennett asked rhetorically, adding, "the right wing ought to be embracing Mansour Abbas, and for political reasons, it's not happening."

Bennett is quick to weigh in on the anti-government protests that have spread across the country in response to the government's attempts to pass legislation that critics say would weaken the judiciary. "What's going on in Israel is one of the most inspiring events that one can imagine," he said. "What I'm going to say is something I could not have said two months ago. I can say it now. You see, the Israeli public gave itself a 75th birthday gift of democracy and freedom and

deep care for the country. And we're talking about a generation that was being called, you know, folks who just like to go out skiing and enjoy life. And what you see is — by the way on both sides of the aisle — that Israelis care. But really, the good news — there's also challenging news — but the good news is that democracy has won. And freedom has won."

"I don't view myself as part of the protest tribe or the government tribe," Bennett, who clarified that he hasn't attended any of the protests and in the past had expressed support for reforms to the judiciary, said. "I can understand the pain of everyone."

That pain, to some degree, has extended to Jewish communities beyond Israel, and to lawmakers in Washington.

"Across the board, everyone wants to ensure that Israel remains a democracy, a liberal democracy," Bennett explained. "Something that I would also want to emphasize to ourselves, to the Israelis, is that the special relationship we have with America, it leans on two pillars: the pillar of interests and the pillar of values. And sometimes it's viewed as platitudes or rhetoric, but it's not. It's true. There's other countries that America has certain interests with, I'm not going to mention their names and they work, you know, you do what you need to do. But you don't do it full-heartedly and you don't do it consistently over decades and decades if it's just a matter of an interaction and a deal. With Israel, what I see is the visceral love of many people in America, not only Jews, to the State of Israel, beginning with the president himself. President [Joe] Biden simply has a very true and genuinely warm heart towards Israel. That's a fact. I saw it when we met a few times."

The government's effort to push forward its initial judicial reform package, Bennett said, "is not going to happen. The tougher part is that Israel is right now going to experience a short- to medium- term period of volatility, after which, the good news is again, I think we're looking at many years of unity governments in Israel."

Whether he will be part of any of those unity governments remains to be seen.

For the moment, Bennett is staying out of politics, focusing on his family and the speaking engagements that have taken him

around the world and across the airwaves. His teenage son Yonatan — who has accrued a sizable TikTok following — will soon begin his compulsory army service. "It used to be that he was Bennett's son, now gradually it's turning into I'm his dad," Bennett joked. "I meet teenagers and they say, 'OK, nice. Where's Yoni?' Especially the girls."

When asked if he plans to reenter politics, Bennett looks out onto his backyard. There's a gentle breeze, and birds are chirping from their perches in the trees. "Look at this beautiful garden. It's a nice day. I'm enjoying my family. If and when things happen," he said with a smile, "I'll give you a call." ♦

Showtime's 'Ghosts of Beirut' examines CIA-Mossad op that brought down one of world's most elusive terrorists

The new limited series follows elusive Hezbollah leader Imad Mughniyeh's rise from the slums of South Beirut to his mysterious killing in Syria in 2008

By Gabby Deutch

Imad Mughniyeh is the most famous terrorist you've never heard of.

That's the premise of "Ghosts of Beirut," a new limited series from Showtime that traces the elusive Hezbollah leader's rise from the slums of South Beirut to his mysterious killing in Syria in 2008. He orchestrated attacks that killed hundreds, and pioneered suicide bombs as a brutal method to shock and sow chaos.

The full story of Mughniyeh's death, which was long assumed to have been masterminded by the CIA and the Mossad, remains classified by the intelligence agencies. So the series' creators — "Fauda" creators Avi Issacharoff and Lior Raz, Emmy-winning documentary producer Greg Barker, and "All Quiet on the Western Front" producer Daniel Dreifuss — offer what the show's title sequence calls "a fictional account of deeply researched events."

"We're intentionally not saying this is the full story. But in broad strokes, this is pretty much what happened," Barker told *Jewish Insider* during a recent interview. "It's the closest possible to the truth that we're likely to get for quite a while, until a lot of this stuff is declassified in 30 or 40 years." The four-part series, which is as much a testament to intelligence agencies' grit as it is to their deep commitment to secrecy, premieres on May 19, with new episodes released weekly.

Barker and a team of journalists and researchers spent half a year tracking down CIA and Mossad sources who had knowledge of the events and said to them: "We're trying to tell the story as accurately as possible, but we know it's still classified. So what do you think happened, or what's

plausible?" Barker recalled. "Then people told us a lot that they wouldn't have told us had I just been saying, 'Look, I need you to go on the record about this.' So we got a lot of insight."

The result is a dramatic retelling of Mughniyeh's life and the many horrific terrorist attacks he orchestrated targeting Americans and Israelis, starting with the 1983 bombings of the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon, which killed 63, including CIA Near East Director Robert Ames, and of the Beirut barracks where hundreds of French and American troops were killed. (He was also indicted by Argentina for his role in the 1992 Israeli Embassy bombing in Buenos Aires, which killed 29.) The show attempts to make sense of the origins of the trends and stories now common in the Middle East, like Iran's support of terrorism and the use of targeted killings as a tactic to root out terrorists.

The series follows the CIA analysts whom Mughniyeh stymied for decades — earning him the nickname "The Ghost" — and the intelligence agencies' many failed attempts to capture or kill him. Viewers get a glimpse of the strategic rivalry between the CIA and Mossad, and the tricky calculus that ensues as the two allies pursue goals that are not always perfectly aligned.

"I've heard about that tension in the friendly relationship for years, and from people in both services," Barker explained. "It was an interesting way of unpacking what these sort of friendly relationships are like from the inside, and what they tell us about the different priorities, the different methods, of both of these different intelligence services, but also of the

countries."

The series alternates between two storylines. One follows Mughniyeh, his family and his fellow Hezbollah fighters and their Iranian backers. The other follows the American and Israeli operatives working to identify and, later, kill him. Some are real, like Ames, the idealistic CIA official who earnestly believed in the early 1980s that Middle East peace was just around the corner, and William Francis Buckley, the CIA station chief in Beirut who was abducted and tortured by Hezbollah.

Then there are the two main protagonists in the hunt for Mughniyeh, who are not based on any single real-life analyst, even though they are rooted in real stories. One is a CIA agent from Dearborn, Mich., who has a relative in Hezbollah, the other a Mossad agent grappling with the moral costs of his work while his wife begs him to quit the service. (The actor Iddo Goldberg, who plays the Mossad agent in the series, got to meet the person on whom his character is based, on the condition that he keep the agent's identity secret.)

"We're not trying to make docu-drama," said Barker. "We're drawing from reality but then interpreting it and finding a way, given what we know that actually happened, and using that to tell the best dramatic story."

The two characters must overcome a deep distrust of each other and of the national-security apparatuses in which they operate. The Mossad agent is worried that the Lebanese-born American agent is a double agent who is secretly harboring a connection to the terrorist group she is trying to fight. And the American worries that the Israeli is too trigger-happy, willing to

kill terrorists even if it might lead to civilian deaths or spark violence in the region.

The tension between the Israelis and the Americans reaches its climax in a scene where Mughniyeh is walking with Qasem Soleimani, who until his death in 2020 was the commander of the Quds Force in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The CIA received presidential permission to assassinate Mughniyeh, and the CIA and Mossad agents were directly on his heels. But the 2007 "presidential finding," as the permission is officially called, did not extend to Soleimani. The Israelis, helmed by then-Mossad chief Meir Dagan, wanted to take Soleimani down too, but Washington said no.

"As far as we know, that really happened, that there was a moment where the two of them were walking together, and there was a decision made," said Barker. "It was just incredibly compelling drama. But I also think it speaks to a deeper aspect of that relationship and the question of, like, How does one in these positions operate in a very murky world where moral lines are quite ambiguous?"

The Americans in the show feared that killing Soleimani would start a massive war

with Iran. Thirteen years later, Soleimani was killed by American hands, in a 2020 drone strike ordered by former President Donald Trump.

"Maybe their calculation at the time was wrong, but I tried to just view it simply in the context of how they felt at the time," said Barker, who spent time in Iran in 2007 while producing a documentary about Iran for PBS' "Frontline."

"It was very much in the minds of people at the time that if they pushed Iran too far, like killing Qasem Soleimani, it might start a war," he noted, and added that the military reality was different then, too. "We also had, and this is the difference from when he was killed [in 2020], a massive troop presence in Iraq, with Iranian-backed militias all over the country."

In 2007, the CIA was very much on the defensive in light of reporting on its controversial "black site" prisons. "The agency was incredibly aware that anything it did was going to be scrutinized," Barker noted. "They were very, very specific that they had to get authorization [to kill Soleimani], and they could only act according to what was spelled out by the letter of the presidential finding."

The series intersperses these dramatic sequences with commentary from real-life journalists, analysts and experts who witnessed and even took part in these events from the 1980s to the early 2000s, as an attempt to add context. The goal of including those voices — including prominent American journalists like the *Washington Post's* David Ignatius and *The New Yorker's* Jane Mayer — was to "give a sense that a lot of this stuff really happened," said Barker.

So what, exactly, is real in this hybrid fiction-nonfiction universe that Barker, Issacharoff, Raz, Dreifuss and screenwriter Joëlle Touma created?

The car bomb that killed Mughniyeh on a Damascus street in 2008 "was 100% a joint operation" between Israel and the U.S., Barker said. And the Americans' last-minute choice not to kill Soleimani happened, too.

This may be the closest anyone can get to the truth. According to Barker, the CIA wouldn't comment on any of what happened. "We went to them," he recalled, "and they said, 'We cannot tell you anything about any aspect of the story.'" ♦

MAY 17, 2023

A hotel of firsts reopens in Tel Aviv after a 70-year hiatus

Sleeping with the ghosts of David Ben-Gurion, Albert Einstein, and King Abdullah I at the newly renovated Elkonin Hotel in Tel Aviv

By Ruth Marks Eglash

In a quiet corner of the bustling metropolis of Tel Aviv, under the watchful eye of gleaming new high-rises but with an unfiltered view of the sparkling Mediterranean Sea, a valuable piece of history has been revived, renovated and restored.

The Elkonin, the first-ever hotel in this, the first modern Jewish city, sits on the far end of Lilienblum Street, on the edge of Tel Aviv's first neighborhood, Neve Tzedek. Boasting such illustrious guests as David Ben-Gurion, Albert Einstein and King Abdullah I, who ruled Jordan from 1921-51,

the hotel reopened for business five months ago after a 70-year hiatus.

The smell of fresh paint and new carpeting still lingers in the hallways of the original 18-room guesthouse, which has now been expanded to some 44 rooms replete with two family suites, a rooftop

pool, bar and a Clarins luxury spa, thanks to a cleverly constructed modern glass tower placed in the center of its L-shaped base.

Like many of the other buildings in this historic and picturesque section of Tel Aviv – the first to be built beyond the ancient port of adjacent Jaffa more than 100 years ago – the Elkonin, in part, tells the intertwined stories of the city and the country's foundings.

Originally opened in 1913, just five years after Tel Aviv was established on dusty sand dunes and with a mere 80 or so buildings standing in the district, the hotel was founded by Menachem and Malka Elkonin. The family, including six children, had immigrated from Smolensk, Russia, in 1911 and lived together on the ground floor, the area that now serves as the modern hotel's bar and lounge reception.

According to family lore, Menachem arrived with a pocketful of French gold coins known as Napoleons, purchased the sandy lot and hired local architect Shmuel Wilson, who promised to bring a modern European style to Eretz Israel, to design and construct the hotel. Three stories high, the elegant exterior complete with wrap-around balconies, stylized stone pillars and wide window ledges, once loomed over the other buildings in the new city.

For a time, the Elkonin was the only hotel outside of Jaffa and courted prominent guests: Ben-Gurion, according to the guest ledger, slept in Room 34 sometime in the 1920s; around that same time, the Jordanian king was a frequent guest.

For roughly three decades, the Elkonin family operated the hotel until new owners took over and it first became the Central Hotel. At some point in the 1940s, was turned into an apartment hotel. In the 1950s through to the '80s, the building contained offices with a few residential apartments remaining, before falling into utter disrepair.

Graffiti-riddled and crumbling, the neglected building was purchased in 2004 by French-Israeli entrepreneur Dominique Romano with an eye to restoring and reopening it once again as a hotel. As a UNESCO-protected structure, however, the renovation process was arduous and bureaucratic, Morgan Mondoloni, the hotel's general manager, told *Jewish Insider* during a recent tour and interview, and it took more than 14 years to fully complete the

restoration and additions.

The hotel, which held its soft launch in January, but only became fully operational last month, is part of the MGallery Hotel Collection belonging to the luxury French multinational hospitality company, the Accor Group. The original structure was brought back to life by Tel Aviv architectural renewal firm Bar Orian, and the interior was refurbished with a stroke of Parisian elegance by French design studio ICONIQUE.

Guests arriving at the hotel today can enjoy many of the original or historic features, including a mix of funky Art Deco floor tiles and the increasingly rare speckled classic Israeli-style ones, as well as one remaining fresco on the ceiling above the stairwell and some of the 1920s-style moldings.

The hotel, of course, has been updated with modern fixtures too. The bedrooms, which also include suites named for the original owners, Menachem and Malka, offer both the airy high ceilings of the last century, plus state-of-the-art lighting and some impressive environmentally friendly high-tech features (think electronically operated blinds).

The hotel's dining room, which is decorated with black-and-white photographs of old Tel Aviv, has been fully refurbished and now contains the exquisite L'Époque Restaurant, belonging to famous French chef Joël Robuchon's chain known for its Michelin stars (Michelin does not rate restaurants in Israel). The restaurant, which is not kosher, is open to outside guests and offers a unique and classic array of French dishes with seafood, fish and meat, as well as an extensive and varied wine list.

Soon, diners will be given the option to enjoy their meal on the hotel's rooftop, which also contains a bar and an infinity pool with a panoramic view of Tel Aviv. In the basement, Clarins, the French beauty company, runs the spa, which offers a deluxe menu of facial and body massage treatments for individuals and couples, as well as a Middle Eastern-style Hammam.

Back in the lobby, there is no classic "front desk" or "concierge table" to greet guests; instead, those arriving are immediately invited to relax on plush couches and enjoy hot or cold beverages while being checked in

by an attentive staff.

Mondoloni, a veteran of the hospitality industry in his native France, said that his goal is to create a warm and welcoming vibe so that people "feel like they've arrived home."

"From the very beginning, this hotel was built as a house, and we want to keep that atmosphere," said the 33-year-old, who immigrated to Israel four years ago.

In the early days of the Elkonin, he continued, "when you arrived at the hotel, there was no reception desk, you arrived right at the dining room, and the rooms were located above."

"I believe that in all of our interactions with guests, we can really change people's lives, even in the smallest ways," theorized Mondoloni. "Sometimes you arrive in Israel, at Ben Gurion Airport and you have to wait hours to get to your luggage or go through security and then there's a taxi driver who is trying to get more money from you or maybe during the flight from New York you had a child yelling – our challenge, when you arrive here, is to make you smile, to make you feel at home and make you forget about everything that just happened."

Mondoloni, who noted that over the past few years Tel Aviv has witnessed a boom in similar boutique hotels, with many even opening within historic premises, said that what sets Elkonin apart is the effort – by him and the French hotel group – to offer a high level of service not generally found in Israel.

"We are very picky about the service, and this has been the greatest challenge of all here," he said. "Hospitality, unfortunately in Israel, is not considered a career – unlike in France or in the United States, you do not see older people serving you."

"Our staff had to learn everything from scratch," Mondoloni explained. "For this, we had teams from the MGallery, from Clarins and from Robuchon working both on the floor and in the kitchen training everyone."

"They told me that it was a struggle because they had to teach everything from scratch, even though we hired people who had previous experience working in hotels, restaurants, or in spas; the level was just not there," he continued.

Mondoloni, who has worked with both the international Hilton hotel group and the Israeli group, Brown, said that with so many

new hotels opening in Tel Aviv, “there is a fight for manpower.”

“Now they are ready and trained, we have to make sure to keep our talents in the

house, and this is what I’m trying to do every day,” he said.

A night at the Elkonin Tel Aviv Hotel starts at \$450 including breakfast. The writer was a guest of the hotel. ♦

MAY 16, 2023

White House faces pressure from the left to buck mainstream antisemitism definition

The Biden administration is close to completing a national antisemitism strategy, but the question of how it will define antisemitism remains in flux

By Gabby Deutch, Marc Rod

As the White House prepares to release a national antisemitism strategy in the coming weeks, the matter of how the document defines antisemitism has become a key point of contention, *Jewish Insider* has learned.

The strategy will include more than 200 policy plans and recommendations to counter antisemitism, President Joe Biden said Tuesday in remarks delivered at a Jewish American Heritage Month reception. But while the strategy is set to be released soon, the White House task force working on the project has not yet decided how to define antisemitism, three sources with knowledge of the White House process said.

At issue is whether the strategy will adopt the widely accepted International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism, which is already in use elsewhere in the federal government. Secretary of State Tony Blinken wrote in a 2021 letter to the American Zionist Movement that the Biden administration “enthusiastically embraces” the IHRA working definition of antisemitism, including its full list of examples.

But the Biden administration is now facing pressure to buck the IHRA definition from some on the left who argue that the IHRA definition, which identifies some forms of anti-Zionism as antisemitism, does

not leave sufficient space for critiques of Israel.

An individual with knowledge of the process said that major mainstream Jewish groups have been advocating for the IHRA definition’s inclusion in the White House strategy. Progressive groups have been urging that it be left out of the strategy — but said they would accept its inclusion if other alternative definitions of antisemitism that have been proposed by academics and activists on the left were mentioned. The source said it remains unclear what the final draft might entail, but that the White House has considered excluding IHRA entirely.

The individual said that the White House has been consulting with a range of both mainstream and progressive Jewish groups on how they would react to the inclusion or exclusion of the IHRA definition. They also said that Jewish groups have emphasized to the White House that they would accept a delay in the strategy’s release, if needed, to work through such issues.

The White House has been targeting a release before the end of the month — prior to the departure of Susan Rice, the director of the Domestic Policy Council, who is spearheading the antisemitism strategy.

Another source with knowledge of the process said one possibility on the table is for the document to refer to the IHRA

definition without formally endorsing or adopting it.

“What I’ve been told repeatedly,” said the source, is that “as much as is humanly possible they want to make everybody in the community that’s engaged in this work as happy as possible.”

Another individual with knowledge of the process agreed that the White House’s approach to defining antisemitism remains unclear and in flux, and there is concern among mainstream Jewish groups that the White House may be shying away from including the IHRA definition. A White House spokesperson declined to comment.

The forthcoming antisemitism strategy is “the most ambitious, comprehensive effort in our history to combat antisemitism in America,” Biden said Tuesday at the White House reception.

He noted that the White House efforts to prepare the report involved conversations with more than 1,000 Jewish community members “from diverse backgrounds and all denominations.” He highlighted the strategy’s four pillars: increasing awareness and understanding of antisemitism and Jewish heritage in America; keeping Jewish communities safe; reversing the normalization of antisemitism; and building coalitions to fight hate.

“As we work together to implement this

report, we're sending a clear and forceful message. In America, evil will not win. Hate will not prevail. The venom and violence of antisemitism will not be the story of our time," said Biden.

Supporters of the IHRA definition question whether a debate over how to define antisemitism — when that definition has been widely accepted by hundreds of municipalities and state and federal governments around the world — distracts from the actual issues at play.

"If you start throwing out alternative definitions, you really divert attention away from finding the problem and into debating definitions," said Mark Weitzman, the chief operating officer at the World Jewish Restitution Organization and one of the architects of the IHRA definition. "I don't think we can or should or can afford to have attention diverted from the major issue, which is fighting antisemitism."

Leaders of the House and Senate's bipartisan antisemitism task forces met last week with officials from the White House task force. Rep. Kathy Manning (D-NC), a co-chair of the House task force, said Tuesday that the lawmakers in attendance made "abundantly clear" to the White House that they all support the IHRA definition.

"I think it's important to have a definition that recognizes that anti-Zionism is often used as a code to cover up antisemitism," Manning told JI. "It's the definition that's used by the State Department, it's the definition that's used by the Department of Education. I think it's the appropriate definition, and I'm hoping that that's what they'll include in their strategy."

Sen. James Lankford (R-OK), a co-chair of the Senate task force, told JI on Tuesday that he also was "very clear... to say the IHRA definition needs to be included."

"It is nonsensical for us not to include the IHRA definition when the United States was one of the bodies that originally created this," Lankford said. "It just doesn't make sense when we have British football teams that have accepted the IHRA definition and the United States government chooses not to, when we were the entity that helped write it, including all the examples."

"They have to make their decision on how they're going to do this," Lankford continued, "but to do another definition,

and ignore the global reach of the IHRA definition, doesn't make sense to me."

Manning said she didn't have any knowledge of the internal deliberations at the White House, but said that the officials had "listened carefully" and "I'm sure they heard what we said."

She also emphasized "the big picture, which is how critically important it is that we're going to see a strategy from them," adding that White House officials said it would include "deliverables where there would be a timeline" and "a strategy that was implementable."

Left-wing activists urging the White House not to include the IHRA definition argue that it is unnecessarily limiting, and that opponents of antisemitism should consider a range of approaches — and a range of definitions.

"I don't think they should endorse or adopt any of them, because I don't think that's useful," said Hadar Susskind, president and CEO of Americans for Peace Now. He pointed to a 2021 congressional letter from several progressive lawmakers that called on the Biden administration to "consider multiple definitions of antisemitism" beyond only IHRA.

"I'd like to see them legitimately say, 'Here are these various tools.' Not, 'We're adopting them, you have to use this.' Just, 'Here are different things that one can use,'" Susskind added.

Dylan Williams, the senior vice president for policy and strategy at J Street, cautioned that "efforts to give the force of law to a single, controversial definition of antisemitism that focuses disproportionately on criticism of Israel does a disservice to Jewish Americans targeted by this hatred." J Street opposes the use of the IHRA definition.

J Street spokesperson Logan Bayroff added that the organization does not "believe [IHRA] should be used as the sole standard by the government when enforcing U.S. law," but noted that J Street would be okay with IHRA "being referenced by the White House or other government entities along with other definitions as resources that may be considered."

If the White House opts to include the IHRA definition in its strategy, that definition will not have any legal bearing. Supporters say it would serve only as a

guidepost for government officials, law enforcement officers and others who must reckon with whether an incident should be viewed as antisemitic.

"How does the policeman on the street recognize antisemitism? 'Well, I have to call up the local federation or the local rabbi,'" said Weitzman. "There's no coherency or continuity there. IHRA is a tool. IHRA by itself does not solve antisemitism, but IHRA can help."

William Daroff, the CEO of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, emphasized that the IHRA definition is the "gold standard," which has been accepted by over 40 countries, dozens of states and hundreds of other groups, including all but two of the members of the Conference of Presidents and the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox movements.

"I am certain that the definition that is accepted by the vast vast majority of American Jewry, and championed across the globe by Secretary [of State Tony] Blinken and Ambassador [Deborah] Lipstadt [the State Department's special envoy on antisemitism], will be prominently highlighted in any comprehensive strategy to combat antisemitism," Daroff told JI, noting, "support for the IHRA definition is long-standing U.S. policy, going back to the Obama administration."

Elana Broitman, the senior vice president of public affairs at the Jewish Federations of North America, told JI, "we strongly support the IHRA definition of antisemitism and will continue to encourage the government to adopt it." ♦

Lipstadt praises IHRA definition, but declines to say if it will be included in White House strategy

‘There will be some things that people will disagree with’ but ‘it’s a message that we take this seriously,’ the antisemitism envoy said of the White House’s strategy

By Marc Rod

Ambassador Deborah Lipstadt, the State Department’s special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism, declined to say Wednesday whether the Biden administration would include the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s working definition of antisemitism in its forthcoming national strategy to combat antisemitism, while praising the definition as “an effective tool.”

The White House is currently under cross pressures on how it should define antisemitism in its upcoming strategy — mainstream Jewish groups are pushing for the administration to incorporate IHRA only, while some on the left say the administration should exclude IHRA or include other definitions that provide more latitude for criticism of Israel. Sources say the administration is considering both options.

Lipstadt, both in her role as special envoy and prior to joining the administration, has been a proponent of the IHRA definition, which is also used by the State Department. Some Jewish community leaders have urged the administration to follow Lipstadt’s advice on the subject.

“It’s been the definition that’s been broadly accepted. The United States has championed [it],” Lipstadt told reporters in a briefing at the State Department on Wednesday. “It’s been very useful, it’s been very useful on the ground. So I think that it’s an effective tool.”

Asked about how the White House plan addresses IHRA or what the impacts of its exclusion might be, Lipstadt declined to “preempt” the strategy, which she said could be released “in the next few days” or “next week.” White House officials have said they expect a rollout by the end of May.

Lipstadt said she and her team have consulted weekly with the administration on the strategy.

Overall, Lipstadt praised the White House and the administration’s process to craft the strategy, which is set to include more than 200 policy proposals and action items — including, Lipstadt said, “things that none of us have thought of” from an array of government agencies.

The Holocaust scholar acknowledged that “there will be some things that people will disagree with — someone will ask, ‘Why didn’t they go further on this?’ or ‘Why did they phrase this that way?’”

But she urged Jewish community members to look at the strategy holistically and said, “it’s a message that we take this seriously.”

She said that top-level officials from each federal agency, the Domestic Policy Council and the National Security Council have participated in crafting the strategy, and recounted that senior officials across the administration have expressed to her that they “see [antisemitism] as a threat to the welfare of this country.”

She added that, in a meeting with agency heads, Ambassador Susan Rice, the director of the Domestic Policy council “made it very clear, ‘Don’t just take two interns and have them sit down and come up with some warmed-over ideas... Look closely at what you do. Are you fighting antisemitism? Are you creating a level playing field for Jews?’”

Throughout her time at the State Department — one year this week — Lipstadt said that she’s found broad support for her work and her message.

“I thought it would be much harder on many issues, [that there would be] more pushback,” she said. “I’ve seen a great

acceptance of the urgency of the issue and the seriousness of the issue.”

Lipstadt said she’s committed to staying in her role at least through the end of President Joe Biden’s first term in office — having requested a three-year leave of absence from Emory University, where she is a tenured professor — but was noncommittal on whether she would remain in her post if Biden is re-elected next November.

One of Lipstadt’s office’s focuses remains on Gulf Arab majority countries, she said. “There is room for pushing things forward,” Lipstadt continued, and she said she has been “encouraged to move ahead in this area as much as I can.”

Lipstadt mentioned that she is in ongoing talks with Saudi officials, including Princess Reema bint Bandar Al Saud, the Saudi ambassador to the United States. She noted that there has been incremental progress in Saudi Arabia in lessening antisemitic hate, and said she is aiming to travel to the kingdom again.

“There’s an openness,” she said. “Does it mean there aren’t other problems? No, of course not. Does it mean there aren’t other things this country’s government finds disturbing? Of course not... It’s step by step by step.”

Lipstadt was on the ground at a synagogue in Tunisia hours before a gunman killed three and injured ten during a Lag B’Omer festival. The envoy said she was “very distressed” and “discouraged” by Tunisian President Kais Saied’s response to the attack.

Saied refused to describe the attack as antisemitic and pivoted in his remarks to discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Lipstadt described that response as

“antisemitic.”

Lipstadt also decried recent comments by Twitter CEO Elon Musk comparing billionaire philanthropist George Soros to a comic book villain who is also a Jewish Holocaust survivor.

“You can criticize George Soros — and many people do — for his economic

policies, even for his political programs, for the work of his foundation, etc.” she said. “But when you draw that kind of analogy... when you turn him into the Rothschild of the 21st century, then you’re engaged in antisemitism. When you link his activities to his Jewish identity... when you turn him into this villainous caricature, which has

antisemitic overtones, you’ve crossed the line.”

The envoy also called Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas’s recent comments at the United Nations comparing Israel to Nazi leaders “just outrageous and beyond the pale.” ♦

MAY 18, 2023

More than 175 American, global Jewish groups urge U.N. to endorse IHRA definition

The groups said the U.N.’s upcoming action plan ‘must acknowledge the importance of the IHRA Working Definition’ of antisemitism

By Marc Rod

A coalition of major American and global Jewish organizations wrote to United Nations leaders on Wednesday urging them to include an endorsement of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s working definition of antisemitism in the U.N.’s forthcoming action plan monitoring and responding to antisemitism.

The letter comes amid continued concerns from many Jewish groups that antisemitism is pervasive in the U.N. system, as well as a domestic push by mainstream Jewish groups in the U.S. — including several of the lead signatories to the U.N. letter — for the White House to endorse the IHRA definition in its own upcoming national antisemitism strategy.

The letter, signed by 177 global Jewish groups and 120 academics from the U.S. and elsewhere, was organized by the American Jewish Committee, Anti-Defamation League, B’nai B’rith International, Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, European Jewish Congress, Jewish Federations of North America and World Jewish Congress.

“Any UN Action Plan must acknowledge

the importance of the IHRA Working Definition to the vast majority of Jewish individuals, organizations, and communities who are the primary targets of antisemitic hatred, discrimination, and violence; are the Action Plan’s primary intended beneficiaries; and are best placed to identify manifestations of hatred and bias directed against us,” the letter reads.

The letter notes that the IHRA definition is not legally binding and calls it “an indispensable tool to understand and fight antisemitism, and one that can be used entirely consistently with fundamental human rights standards.”

The letter acknowledges that the IHRA definition’s examples, particularly those related to criticism of Israel, have prompted concerns from “some civil society organizations,” but argue that the inclusion of such examples “is precisely what makes this tool uniquely valuable for understanding and monitoring modern day antisemitism.”

The signatories further argue that other definitions crafted in response to IHRA “do not adequately or effectively clarify this form of antisemitism and are not appropriate

for inclusion in the UN Action Plan” and that “there are few if any examples of their practical use.” As such, they argue, “any references to these alternative definitions would only introduce greater confusion into the UN Action Plan and undermine our common efforts to combat antisemitism.”

They also note that the IHRA definition “explicitly affirms that criticism of Israel per se is not antisemitic” and that governments that use it “have found it entirely possible to sharply criticize Israeli policies and practices.”

The letter highlights that the IHRA definition has been widely adopted by international governments and organizations, U.S. states, local governments and various other sectors of public life. It also notes that Ahmed Shaheed, the U.N.’s special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, has also recommended the IHRA definition’s use.

The letter’s arguments in favor of IHRA and against other definitions of antisemitism come amid similar wrangling within the U.S. over whether to include or endorse the IHRA definition in the Biden administration’s antisemitism plan.

The administration is under pressure from left-wing groups not to include IHRA, or to also include other definitions alongside it, which proponents of IHRA argue would

undermine its effectiveness. Mainstream Jewish groups are urging the inclusion of the IHRA definition alone.

Several of the organizers and signatories

to the U.N. letter have provided input to the White House on its antisemitism strategy. ♦

MAY 15, 2023

Abu Dhabi grad school aims to help bridge AI programmer gap

Emirates unit of Israeli VC platform deepens ties with MBZ University of Artificial Intelligence, OurCrowd's Sabah al-Binali tells The Circuit

By Jonathan H. Ferziger

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

When OurCrowd put down roots in the United Arab Emirates and built a startup focused on making sense of financial data, the Israeli venture capital platform found two of its first programmers at the Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence.

The computer science graduate school was established in 2019 as part of the UAE's push to become a Middle East spawning ground for technology businesses. Now, Jerusalem-based OurCrowd, which established a subsidiary in Abu Dhabi two years ago, sees the university as a source of high-value programming talent for young tech companies in its investment portfolio that are looking to operate in the Gulf.

"Within Israel, there's a huge supply of engineers and scientists and programmers, but the demand for them is even greater," Sabah al-Binali, executive chairman of OurCrowd Arabia, told *The Circuit*. In Abu Dhabi, he said, "we can get top people from around the world."

To anchor the relationship, OurCrowd signed a memorandum of understanding with the university last week designed to help attract AI companies to Abu Dhabi and channel graduates into jobs at some of the startups financed by the crowdfunding

firm. The agreement will help OurCrowd demonstrate its value in the oil-rich Gulf state, which normalized relations with Israel in 2020 under the Abraham Accords, al-Binali said.

The MOU calls for OurCrowd and the university, known as MBZUAI, to establish an AI-focused venture capital investment fund with the goal of attracting both international and domestic AI companies to use the campus as a technology accelerator for scaling up in size. Students from MBZUAI would be guided to internships and job opportunities at companies funded by OurCrowd that operate in the UAE, Israel and around the world.

It also establishes a strategic relationship between MBZUAI and Integrated Data Intelligence (IDI), OurCrowd's fintech subsidiary in Abu Dhabi, to collaborate on research projects in applying AI technologies to a widening range of industries. In addition, partnerships are envisioned with government entities and related businesses.

"Part of MBZUAI's existence is to foster entrepreneurship and this partnership creates a mechanism for incubating startups and creating local opportunities for the university's pipeline of talent," Sultan Al Hajji, the university's vice president of public affairs, said in a May 9 statement. "Through this strategic partnership with OurCrowd

Arabia, MBZUAI is forging ahead with its mission to develop a dynamic, vibrant, AI ecosystem that will help to position Abu Dhabi as a global center for AI."

The university, which first started classes in 2021, has about 260 students from more than 25 countries, who are enrolled for master's and doctoral degrees in computer vision, machine learning and natural language processing. It was conceived in 2018 as part of a national strategy for making the UAE a global leader in AI. Eric Xing, a former professor of computer science at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, is the school's president.

OurCrowd, founded by American-Israeli entrepreneur Jon Medved in 2013, enables smaller investors to participate in financing startups and bet on large returns if the companies are bought or go public. More than 224,000 people are registered to invest through OurCrowd in amounts as small as \$10,000. The firm has provided funds for more than 400 companies, including Beyond Meat, Innoviz and Freightos, which trade on the Nasdaq.

After the UAE and Israel established diplomatic ties, OurCrowd was one of the first venture capital firms to set up operations in the Gulf nation, hiring al-Binali and opening an office in the Abu Dhabi Global Market free zone. It announced an agreement with

the Abu Dhabi Investment Office, or ADIO, last November to create an AI tech hub and invest \$60 million in the emirate. IDI, which enables businesses to organize vast troves of financial data through AI, is a joint venture between OurCrowd and ADIO.

Among OurCrowd-funded companies active in the UAE are ThetaRay, which helps banks track financial transactions and sniff out fraud; and Intell-Act, which uses AI to monitor cameras in airports, avoid flight delays and make operations more efficient.

Central to OurCrowd's strategy was

treating the UAE "as a two-way bridge, not one way," al-Binali said. "It's not just how can I benefit, but how can I benefit the potential partners."

As funding has tightened from venture capital funds in the U.S. because of bank collapses and the global economic slowdown, tech companies have increasingly been looking at the Gulf states, pumped up this year by high oil prices, as a source for cash. Abu Dhabi's Mubadala \$284 billion sovereign wealth fund put out word that it's ready to help finance promising tech

companies while warning that due diligence will be intense.

"The overall, overarching perception today amongst a lot of our VC colleagues is that everybody should go to the Middle East and raise capital, because that's where the money is," Ibrahim Ajami, Mubadala Capital's head of ventures, told the Milken Institute Global Conference in Beverly Hills, Calif., earlier this month, adding, "there's a very high bar for it. Investors are much more sophisticated." ♦

MAY 17, 2023

Chabad rabbis and rebbetzins from far-flung locales gather in Morocco

Emissaries from nearly 40 countries, from Austria to Zambia, meet to discuss challenges of sustaining small communities, hold celebration in Maimonides' home

By Judah Ari Gross

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Dozens of Chabad rabbis and rebbetzins gathered in Morocco this week for a semi-annual gathering of emissaries from small communities across the Middle East, Africa and Europe to share experiences, to swap tips and, more generally, to form relationships with other people struggling with the same challenges, participants told *eJewishPhilanthropy*.

"This is an excellent opportunity for rabbis from different regions to come together and discuss ways to strengthen the Jewish community in Africa, Europe and the Middle East," Rabbi Levi Banon of Chabad in Morocco said at the start of the conference.

The gathering, which was held from Monday to Wednesday, coincided with the

recent completion of the study of *Mishneh Torah*, a 14-volume code of *halacha*, or Jewish law, which was compiled in the 12th century by Maimonides, who lived for several years in Fez, Morocco, following his family's expulsion from Spain by Berbers.

Similar to the daily study of Talmud, *Daf Yomi*, some study sections of the *Mishneh Torah* each day, completing the cycle every year or every three years. This year's cycle ended just a few days before the gathering. To mark the occasion, the conference organized a *siyum*, a celebration marking the completion of the study of a religious tract, in Maimonides' home in Fez.

"We sat for a meal together with the mayor, with security forces from the city, with representatives from the Jewish community," Rabbi Mendy Chitrik, the Istanbul-based head of Turkey's Ashkenazi community and the chairman of the Alliance

of Rabbis in Islamic States, which he formed in 2019, told eJP. "It was quite historic, celebrating in the house of Maimonides," he said.

The gathering was attended by Chabad emissaries representing small communities from nearly 40 countries: Angola, Austria, Bulgaria, Canada, Canary Islands, Congo, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Ghana, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Ivory Coast, Luxembourg, Malta, Mauritius, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Nigeria, North Cyprus, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Rwanda, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, Uganda, United Arab Emirates and Zambia.

"It's rabbis and *rebbetzins*, *shluchim* and *shluchot* who live in small communities that don't have much Jewish infrastructure," Chitrik said, jokingly categorizing the participants as "anyone who does not have

a kosher grocery store in town and has to *shlep* in suitcases of food.”

Chitrik, who has been based in Turkey since 2003, said the number of participants from these small communities has increased dramatically in the past few years, from 20 members at the first conference in 2017 to approximately 50 this year.

He credited this growth to two main factors: One, the fact that many of the posts in cities and countries with larger communities are already filled, meaning new emissaries have to look for farther flung locales. And two, the Abraham Accords, which made both made it easier for communities to spring up and also increased the need for communities as more Jews traveled and

settled in majority Muslim countries.

However, Chitrik stressed that “Chabad’s presence in the Middle East preceded the Abraham Accords,” noting the presence of emissaries in the UAE and other communities years before the agreements were signed in 2020.

Indeed, the gathering marked almost 75 years of Chabad activities in Morocco. In 1950, the then-newly appointed Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson sent Chabad’s first emissaries to Morocco. During that decade, working with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Chabad established a network of yeshivas in Morocco and generally helped support Jewish life in the country. The families of

those emissaries were invited to attend the conference to mark the occasion.

Chitrik said the conference offered an opportunity to emissaries to “share the load” and realize that other people are going through many of the same logistical challenges of establishing Jewish infrastructure – a kosher food supply, a *mikveh*, Shabbat services – in areas that didn’t have them before, as well as discuss the more personal difficulties of bringing up children in relatively remote locations.

“We spoke about how to educate our children, which is a major, major issue. We want to provide our children with the best Jewish education, the same Jewish education that we received,” he said. ♦