

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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SEPTEMBER 14, 2023

Harriet Schleifer looks to maintain Jewish unity as new Conference of Presidents chair

'As Jews in America we cannot afford to be divided,' the former AJC president in her first interview with eJewishPhilanthropy since taking her new role this summer

By Haley Cohen

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations (CoP), the largest Jewish organization in the U.S., elected Harriet Schleifer on June 1 as the organization's new chair.

A former president of the American Jewish Committee, Schleifer has been a member of the Conference of Presidents' executive council since 2019. She replaced Dianne Lob, who served as CoP chair from June 2021 to May 2023.

Schleifer enters the new role during a particularly fraught period, with rising antisemitism, deepening partisan divisions in both the U.S. and Israel and a growing

disconnect between American Jewry and the Israeli government, if not the State of Israel more generally.

Schleifer, a retired attorney focused on education law, whose husband Leonard founded and still runs the Regeneron Pharmaceuticals firm, has been involved in Jewish communal life for decades, along with other philanthropic work.

She is a trustee of Cornell University and Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and serves on the boards of the Jewish Museum in New York and Plaza Jewish Community Chapel. Additionally, Schleifer has held a number of local leadership positions in her hometown of Westchester, N.Y., including positions with UJA-Federation of New York Westchester chapter, Westchester Jewish Council,

and she served as president of Bet Torah Synagogue in Mt. Kisco, N.Y.

Schleifer recently sat down with *eJewishPhilanthropy* to discuss how she plans to unite the Jewish community in her new role as chair of the umbrella organization that represents 50 diverse American Jewish organizations.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Haley Cohen: What are your specific plans in the new role? What are a few top areas you plan to focus on?

Harriet Schleifer: As the new chair of the Conference, my goal and my calling is to bring together the various myriad Jewish

voices in the United States to educate ourselves and derive a consensus as best as possible, to promote the Jewish voice on issues of antisemitism, stopping Iran from its interference in state policies and uranium enrichment. We've got to come together and have a united voice about the perils, not only the threat Iran poses to Israel but against the free world and the United States.

[I] also seek to come together and help our government implement the White House strategy to fight antisemitism.

We have to be vigilant about keeping Jewish identity and Jewish pride alive. Our younger generations of Jews have experienced somewhat of a golden age in this country to the extent that we have achieved so much as American Jews, in some respects we may be disconnected or less informed about the Jewish perspective on all the things we hope to achieve to make the world better. The connection is not necessarily front of mind for young people so we'd like to develop opportunities to enhance our identities and that should lead to a connection with Israel.

Our Israel-diaspora relations need a healthy boost. We don't always understand each other's sensibilities. The Conference can play a role in uniting the two largest hubs of the Jewish community.

Most importantly, is to bring together our 50 member organizations to educate ourselves and to listen to each other because we are not monolithic. We come from various political sensibilities, we come from different cultural backgrounds, we are different genders and different observances. We need to find what keeps us together and celebrate that. My goal is to celebrate what we have together so our future is more certain.

HC: *What do you think the role of philanthropy is in implementing the Conference of Presidents' goals?*

HS: No nonprofit organization can succeed on air and hope. Our member organizations contribute about 20% of our budget, so we are reliant on private philanthropy, foundations and individuals to keep our work vital and to enhance opportunities where member organizations and others become as informed as possible

and leverage each organizations' mission.

HC: *You've expressed that improving accessibility for people with disabilities is an area of interest. How do you plan to make the Jewish community more inclusive?*

HS: I'm a believer in not leaving people out and that's been my entire childhood, adolescence and adulthood. The fact that one of my children is challenged to a great degree, almost seemed like it was ordained because I've always had an eye for bringing people in. On a personal and professional level, I've created opportunities and deserved government entitlements for people with disabilities and also with regard to the Jewish voice. I am adamant that we have to stand up and we cannot leave Jewish voices to the fringes of our world.

HC: *Does the desire for consensus and shared priorities not risk giving hard-line voices a de facto veto on CoP? The CoP is not able to speak out in favor of maintaining the Law of Return (which guarantees Israeli citizenship to anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent) because the Zionist Organization of American (ZOA) and Orthodox Union (OU) oppose its "grandchild clause." More recently, while CoP's CEO William Daroff spoke favorably of Jack Lew, President Joe Biden's pick to be the next U.S. ambassador to Israel, the conference itself does not appear to have released any statement in support of the nominee, even as many of the members — including the OU — came out in favor of him. Was this because of the ZOA's stated opposition to his nomination?*

HS: We would not make a comment on Jack Lew's nomination but we would put out a statement if he were confirmed. We are nonpartisan and careful not to get involved in support of any particular candidate running, even though Jack is not running. On his confirmation, we will be prepared. It's not a done deal yet so it's not ripe for comment right now.

HC: *In an op-ed you recently wrote for The Jerusalem Post, you said that "American Jews constitute a bloc on an important set of issues." What are those issues?*

HS: American Jews constitute a bloc on making sure that antisemitism and any kind of bigotry is to be cut short. We as American Jews not only need to protect ourselves, but we need to ensure that there is pluralism and freedom of expression that our government guarantees.

We work to express and implement Hillel's credo that "If I am not for myself who am I? If I am only for myself what am I? And if not now when?"

I think what American Jews and the Conference seeks to do is make sure that American Jewry, Israel and Jews worldwide are safe, secure, can go about their lives and work with each other in harmony.

HC: *Are there values that you or CoP hold above unity and consensus?*

HS: The Conference was organized in 1956 under the Eisenhower administration. The mandate was to come together in one voice regarding policies presented to the administration.

So our focus is really to educate ourselves, to convene, to listen to each other and unite where it makes sense as much as possible. The focus is to present platforms that our member organizations can stand with, and we don't judge different missions. The Conference tries to maintain the lane that we were asked to do when we were established.

We are working very hard to make sure that we have as little divisiveness [as possible]. As Jews in America we cannot afford to be divided. Our legacy is our continued peoplehood and pride. My hope and my calling, [as] a daughter of Holocaust survivors, is to ensure a Jewish well-being for many generations to come. Jewish continuity is in my heart, my head and my *kishkes*. You can never make whole what was lost, but as I breathe, I'm going to make sure we have a future. ♦

Thirty years on, are the Oslo Accords still relevant?

Even as the vision of a two-state solution between Israelis and Palestinians endures in the talking points of American and European diplomats, few Israelis or Palestinians believe the prospect is realistic

By Ruth Marks Eglash

It was a moment that remains emblazoned in the annals of history: Two bitter enemies – Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat – shaking hands in a public ceremony on the White House lawn and establishing a future vision of two states for two peoples living side by side in peace, dignity, and security.

While the concept of the “Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements,” or, as it is better known, the Oslo Accords, has endured in the talking points of U.S. and European officials and analysts, who still cling to its relevance, for a whole new generation of Israelis and Palestinians, however, that dream of peace remains elusive. Three decades later, the question lingers as to whether the basic premise of Oslo is in any way salvageable or realistic today.

Analysts, experts and even some of those involved in the initial and subsequent agreements interviewed by *Jewish Insider* agreed that although part of the fundamental and practical infrastructure of Oslo might remain, the underlying goal of a two-state solution, as envisaged in 1993, has more or less failed. In order to move forward and find a possible solution to this intractable conflict, many said they believe it is time to consider a different approach.

“Let’s be clear about this, Oslo was a groundbreaking process,” Dan Miodownik, a professor of political science and international relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, told *JI* in an interview ahead of the Sept. 13 anniversary of that handshake.

“It was an extremely important moment that really filled Israel, Palestine and the region with hope,” Miodownik, whose expertise lies in the field of conflict

resolution, continued. “The fact that the agreement failed in the implementation stage is a huge disaster, and while we can analyze why that happened or who is to blame, the fact is that this is where we are 30 years after the signing.”

Samer Sinijlawi, head of the Jerusalem Development Fund for Education and Community Development, a nonprofit that raises greater awareness of Palestinian issues around the world, told *JI*, “For my generation, Oslo, initially, looked like the beginning of our dreams.”

“Finally, Rabin and Arafat were shaking hands, it looked like we were no longer enemies,” he reminisced. “It was very symbolic and there was a lot of hope.”

“We [Palestinians] were not a very political people, and we were a little bit naïve back then,” Sinijlawi continued, explaining how while the violence of the First Intifada forced the sides to consider reconciliation, the Second Intifada, which sparked multiple suicide bombings, did the opposite. “It killed the peace camp in Israel and the Israeli confidence in the Palestinians.”

And, the former Fatah activist added, “While a lot of people in America believe that the peace process is ongoing... this is the longest peace process in history, and it can’t really be called a process because there is no process, and it can’t be called peace because there’s no peace in it either.”

Historians and experts cite an array of reasons why the political left was unable to implement its vision post-Oslo: Palestinian terrorism during the Second Intifada, which spurred the precipitous rise of right-wing ideas in Israeli society; the significant growth of settlements in the West Bank, on the land earmarked for a Palestinian state; the hopelessness in Palestinians society and the fragmentation of its leadership, which has left Israel with no single partner for peace;

and ever-deepening violent radicalization, especially in the Gaza Strip.

While the vision of peace as it was laid out back then may no longer be feasible, Kobi Michael, a senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies, told *JI* that the basic premise of recognition and much of the infrastructure created in the original Oslo declaration continues to exist today.

“Many people ask me if I think Oslo is a failure and my answer is that there is no simple answer,” said Michael. “One of the most important successes of the process is the idea that Israel, as the nation-state of the Jewish people and the Zionist project, must be separate from the Palestinians if it wants to continue.”

“There is still a broad consensus, at least among Jews in Israel, about the need to disengage from the Palestinians,” he continued. “Although there are severe disputes about how to disengage and severe disputes about whether there is a partner on the Palestinian side with whom we can reach a disengagement agreement with.”

In addition, Michael pointed out, the Palestinian Authority is an outcome of the Oslo Accords, and the State of Israel, including the current government, still believes that the Palestinian Authority, “as a functioning, stable, and cooperating entity with Israel, is an Israeli strategic interest.”

Add to that, the division of the West Bank into Areas A, B, and C, as well as the security and civilian cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and there are many features of Oslo that live on, he said.

Yossi Beilin, Israel’s former justice minister and one of the key architects of the original plan, told *JI* that the biggest failure of Oslo “is that it is still relevant.”

“It shouldn’t be relevant,” he said. “It

should have died 25 years ago, on May 4, 1999, which was the deadline for the permanent agreement between the parties, but, as we know, nothing happened then.”

“We wanted Oslo to be conducive to a permanent agreement, which included the division of the land, assuring that Israel remains a Jewish and democratic state,” Beilin highlighted. “For [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu [whose first term as prime minister was between 1996-99], however, it was a tool to keep the status quo while increasing the settlements and giving up on Israel’s responsibility for the Palestinians.”

“The fact that Oslo is an interim agreement did not matter to the right wing [in Israel], and it has been abused as a kind of permanent agreement,” he explained. “A bridge of rocks became a permanent bridge, which is by definition impossible, and there was a demand that the [Palestinian] side refer to it as a peace treaty forever, despite the fact that it was only 40% of the West Bank and did not include total autonomy.”

On the Palestinian side, Sinjilawi noted that the only Palestinians still interested in talking about this solution to the conflict are “the stakeholders of the Palestinian Authority, some 160 people in Ramallah who live in a bubble.... Those with a red carpet, VIP cards and heavy bank accounts.”

“They don’t want to look at the reality on the ground,” he said, adding that most Palestinians know “that you can no longer have a two-state solution.”

“How can you separate the two communities now?” Sinjilawi asked. “It’s not seven or eight hundred thousand settlers anymore, it’s also the infrastructure that is connecting everything together and connecting all the settlements with Tel Aviv and other Israeli cities.”

Aaron David Miller, who was previously deputy special Middle East coordinator and worked on the Oslo process in the 1990s, acknowledges that the framework as it was laid out has not borne out into reality.

“It’s rational to assume that the two-state solution is dead,” said Miller. But, he added, no other approach besides “separation through negotiation” has provided a realistic, long-term solution.

The two-state solution remains the bedrock of American foreign policy in the

region, although President Joe Biden’s decision not to appoint an advisor focused specifically on the peace process indicates that it is not a high priority. Yet it remains a talking point for the Biden administration, and Biden is tying his goal of Israeli-Saudi normalization to gains for the Palestinians.

“Unless [the Israelis and Palestinians] separate into two polities that are willing and able to live with one another, there is simply no way to address the demographic, political [and] psychological elements, and the proximity problem, the problem of occupation, that drives the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” said Miller.

Michael Milshtein, head of the Palestinian Studies Forum at the Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University and author of the forthcoming book *Thirty Years Since Oslo, One, Two or Three States?* said while it is no longer possible to discuss the “scenario of implementing the two-state vision as it was shaped in 1993,” it was still important to find a resolution to a conflict that appears to have no end.

“When I hear Americans or Europeans speaking about the two-state vision, I think they really mean a two-state principle because the two-state vision can no longer be implemented today, yet you can promote the principle of two states or of physical separation between the communities,” he reasoned.

“In 2023, what we have is two choices: The first is the one-state reality, which is not a solution but a reality that will happen because of the melting of the West Bank into Israel,” he explained. Milshtein added that in lieu of a process, Israel now needs to make a hard choice: a country for all its citizens with the possibility of the non-Jewish population overtaking the Jewish one at some point, or a country where the Jewish population maintains control, even if it becomes a minority, he said.

The other option Milshtein laid out is for Israel to unilaterally declare a Palestinian state in the West Bank, much like it did with Gaza in 2005. “I think the idea that the Palestinians have their own self-determination, even if it is limited, will be a building block for the future,” he said.

Alternatively, Beilin, along with a group of Israelis and Palestinians, has been pushing for a Holy Land Confederation that

would move beyond the Oslo Accords and, he believes, offer a more realistic solution that could be implemented immediately. The proposal, according to its executive summary, would provide “a new framework for the negotiation of a permanent solution between the two sovereign states of Israel and Palestine, and not as a substitute for it.”

Gilead Sher, a former senior peace negotiator, who worked on the subsequent Oslo II Accords signed in 1995, said that while a similar peace process is not “on the cards in the foreseeable future,” efforts should still be made to find a solution.

“I think that what we should look for is a gradual process with several interim and transitional stages that allow us to lower the bar of expectation in order to obtain objectives, on the ground and also diplomatically,” said Sher, who also served as chief of staff to former Prime Minister Ehud Barak. “I am quite aware that the current government is not interested in moving anywhere other than de facto annexation of the West Bank.”

He added that despite the obvious failures of Oslo, a separation of Israelis and Palestinians “is still the very best solution for Israel to preserve its identity as a Jewish, democratic and ethical state.”

“The idea of Oslo has not died yet but suffers from a very severe illness and lessons should be learned from this process,” said INSS’ Michael. “I think it is time to change the approach to the Palestinians; we need to begin behaving towards them as grown adults who are responsible for themselves and who must fulfill their commitments, including an end to supporting terrorism and inciting.”

“At the very same time, Israel must take steps as well,” Michael continued. “I think there is still an option to change the reality although it will not be easy, we just have to work very hard to realize it.”

Washington correspondent Gabby Deutch contributed to this report. ♦

The political lessons of Oslo reverberate on the Israeli right 30 years later

Right-wing grievance against Israel's political establishment in 1993 now defines the mindset of the Netanyahu-led coalition government in 2023

By Lahav Harkov

With the 30th anniversary of the Sept. 13 signing of the Oslo Accords, the Israeli right is still being shaped by the backlash to what it saw as the pursuit of an agreement with the Palestinians at all costs — even as some of the leading opponents of the peace process movement are now in power and running Israel's government.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who as opposition leader was an outspoken critic when the Accords were signed in 1993, is still fuming about the consequences — namely the waves of Palestinian terrorism that subsequently transpired during the pursuit of a two-state solution.

Earlier this month, when asked about the Oslo Accords in a closed-door briefing, Netanyahu said that the decision to pursue the wide-ranging peace treaty with the Palestinians was “a terrible historic mistake.”

Netanyahu emphasized the problem of empowering Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman Yasser Arafat and his acolytes, such as current Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who came under fire last week for denying the Holocaust and spouting antisemitic conspiracy theories.

“It’s incomprehensible,” the prime minister lamented, according to a source in the room. “We could have developed local Palestinian leadership instead of forces that want to destroy us.”

“With the perspective of 30 years, this was a terrible folly. In order to reconcile, we must obliterate the Palestinian hope that most of the Arab world will continue to object to the existence of Israel,” Netanyahu continued.

Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense

Committee Chairman Yuli Edelstein, a Likud member, recounted living in the Gush Etzion settlement bloc near Jerusalem, at the time.

“On the day the agreements were signed, I got a gun license,” he said at a conference of the Bithonistim, a security policy group, and the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security. “I understood the ramifications of the Accords...Processes like Oslo and the disengagement [from Gaza] cannot be theoretical successes. This was a race in the wrong direction, without any thought about the logic behind it.”

The political lessons of the Oslo period — whether the dissolution of a solidly right-wing government that precipitated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s rise, or the mass protest movement of the time — reverberate on the right today.

An issue that was secondary at the time, but is now at the fore in right-wing politics, is a sense that the “elites,” in media, academia, government institutions or elsewhere, lean to the left. Though the right has held the majority in Israel for the past 14 years, many activists feel like they’re operating under different standards from the center-left opposition.

Army Radio Commander Danny Zaken, a pro-Netanyahu journalist, said at the Bithonistim-JISS conference that “in 2023, the media coverage still sticks to a narrative, like in Oslo. It’s a sin against journalism.”

At the same event, Nitzan Chen, head of the Government Press Office and a veteran journalist, said “the coverage of the Oslo Accords...was part of an atmosphere of a ‘New Middle East.’ The sin was not just of the media but of the whole system. The army shut its eyes...It was a failure at the level of the Yom Kippur War.”

Today, the tenor of coverage towards the current protests against Netanyahu’s efforts at judicial overhaul has been adulatory in the eyes of the Israeli right — even when main thoroughfares in Tel Aviv and other cities are blocked by demonstrators.

In 1995, former far-right Likud MK Moshe Feiglin, founder of Zo Artzeinu, one of the leading movements protesting the Oslo Accords, was, alongside Shmuel Sackett, convicted of sedition for his role in, according to a *Jewish Telegraph Agency* report at the time, “a series of anti-government protests they led,” during which time “activists in the group blocked traffic along major roads across the country in a series of protests against the peace policies of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.”

“The government, media, judiciary, academia and security forces — all the systems, elected or not — got up to try to destroy the protest movement,” Feiglin recounted last week. “Now, it’s the opposite.”

Feiglin does not give the Israeli right a pass. He left Likud and founded his own party, Zehut, which ran in the 2019 election but did not enter the Knesset. His argument is that the right has no positive message — it only knows what it does not want — and he said he can understand the left demonstrating against a government that he said only presents a negation of their ideas.

“In the 30 years since the Oslo Accords and the demonstrations that I had the honor to lead, the Jewish majority was mostly under Netanyahu, and he did not offer any alternative to Oslo’s rationale,” he lamented. “There is finally a totally right-wing government with a plan to make a change — a very important one to fix the takeover by the judiciary — but there is no ideology. It’s just a toolbox for the day on

which they have an ideology. The process should be backward: Tell us your vision, and if someone gets in the way, then fix it.”

The undercurrent of the ongoing protests this year is a reversal of the Oslo protests’ dynamic, Feiglin explained.

“The Israeli elite that established the country and its political frameworks did so based on secular and civil foundations that were supposed to create meaning for the whole movement. We had a country to establish and wars to fight. But if you asked ‘why,’ they took you to Yad Vashem, which became the Holy Temple of Israelism. That doesn’t work anymore; we squeezed all the juice out of that lemon,” Feiglin said.

The old “elite” promoted a “Zionism of survival,” while society is moving towards a “Zionism of destiny,” that derives its meaning from Judaism, he argued.

“Those who are used to the state being built in their image are scared, and their fear turns into hatred, which turns into the demonstrations we see now,” Feiglin said. Sara Haetzni Cohen, head of the right-wing My Israel movement, took part in protests against Oslo as a child in a politically active family. She recounted a paradoxical feeling where her close surroundings were riled up, while “the whole world kept going on as normal.”

Opposition Leader Yair Lapid wrote an often-quoted column in 2005 against protesters blocking roads before the Gaza disengagement, headlined “Someone Will Die.” When confronted with the article on TV this year, Lapid said that “many years passed, these are different people.”

“The feeling,” Haetzni Cohen said, citing Lapid’s comments, “is that there are those who are more equal and those who are less equal...The media admires the [current] protesters. They’re in the same milieu. You see it in the jargon they use, calling the reform a ‘coup.’”

Israel Hayom journalist Ariel Kahana, who has been chronicling and analyzing news in Hebrew for right-wing publications since the 1990s, pointed out that Oslo and the Gaza disengagement moved forward despite the protests.

“What the right said after that is: What’s the point of protesting? It changes nothing,” he said.

Refusal to serve in the IDF was not a part

of the Oslo Accords protests, and a total of 63 soldiers refused orders in protest against the Gaza withdrawal.

Kahana called the mass refusal of reservists to serve in the IDF “incomparable to anything that had happened. This is a totally different level.”

Haetzni Cohen said the reservists’ protest means “the elites are holding the state in a very sensitive place...For the media, if you refused to do reserve duty then, you were a traitor. Today, you’re a hero.”

Feiglin went so far as calling the refusal to report for reserve duty a “passive military coup.” Those who refuse to serve are “taking the power of national security into their hands to prevent an elected government from implementing the policies it promised to the majority that elected it,” he said.

Kahana pointed out that the “death blow” of the protests against the Oslo Accords was Rabin’s November 1995 assassination. Rhetoric referring to the Oslo negotiators as traitors or Nazis were commonplace on the right before Rabin’s assassination, and one infamous demonstration featured a coffin labeled “Zionism.” Those references ended after Rabin was murdered, according to Kahana. “The murder paralyzed the right... Politicians were more careful after that with ... the words they say.”

At the same time, Kahana admitted that today’s Knesset members are not cautious with their words.

The protests against Oslo were led by “ideological settlers and Likud supported them, because the idea spoke to them. Today, the ideological right is dragged behind the Likud, which is leading,” he explained.

The main debate over the Oslo Accords – whether Israel can exchange land for peace with the Palestinians — has not been the central topic in Israeli politics for many years, without any prospective peace talks between Jerusalem and Ramallah on the horizon.

For many years the ideological right had an ironclad rule not to bring down a right-wing government because internal divisions brought down Yitzhak Shamir’s government in 1992 and led to the rise of Yitzhak Rabin and Oslo.

That changed, partly as a result of Naftali Bennett forming a coalition with the center-left in 2021, Kahana said, but also partly

because “the motivations are different now. They’re more political in the sense that our camp should win, not necessarily to protect the Land of Israel. There wasn’t really a danger of [land concessions] in the [Bennett-led] government, so it was ‘my soccer team will win.’ It’s less ideological and more political.”

“The lesson of the 1992 election was undoubtedly that divisions in the right could lead to terrible terrible diplomatic steps,” Kahana added. “Today, I think the... motivation to prevent divisions in the right is to maximize votes, not because there is a clear and present danger.”

The reason land concessions are no longer top of the agenda is that they failed, Haetzni Cohen said.

“Even those who think [the Gaza disengagement] was a success realize that Judea and Samaria is another story,” Haetzni Cohen argued. “It no longer looks reasonable to make such aggressive and brutal moves like the expulsion [of Israelis from Gaza].”

“As long as the IDF fights terror and there’s a status quo, most of the public doesn’t think about it. They care about personal security, the cost of living, and other serious problems,” she said.

Still, Haetzni Cohen warned, “It’s only a matter of time until the conflict returns to center stage. It hasn’t disappeared.” ♦

Democrats anticipate messy debate over Israel in crafting 2024 platform

Party leaders are hoping that Biden's incumbency will defuse clashes between the establishment and activist left over Middle East policy.

By Gabby Deutch

As the Republican presidential primary heats up, the Democratic Party appears set to avoid a major primary fight in 2024 — meaning that if President Biden is renominated, Democrats will defer divisions within the party over its ideological direction to 2028, when internal debates between moderates and progressives will almost certainly come to a head.

But while Biden has secured the support of party leaders from the left and the center in his reelection bid, intra-party factions could still have one opportunity to do battle next year in the writing of the party platform, a wonky exercise that has in recent years played host to major ideological debates. In the last three presidential election cycles, Israel has emerged as an issue that splits the party's establishment from its left-wing activists.

In a president's reelection year, the party's platform usually remains relatively unchanged from four years earlier. The main goal, Democratic activists tell Jewish Insider, is to avoid controversy and cede control to the president to set the agenda. But that doesn't mean activists critical of Israel will not take the opportunity to try to force a messy debate over Israel to the forefront, and bring that internal debate to the public.

"It's a question of what do we push for, it's not a question of what they're gonna do," said James Zogby, the founder of the Arab American Institute who for decades has tried to push Democrats away from its historic closeness with the Jewish state. Zogby acknowledges that, with Biden at the helm of the party, it is unlikely that any major policy changes on Israel will take hold. But he plans to raise the issues, as he

has for nearly four decades.

The committee tasked with drafting the platform will not be named until next year, and Democrats don't expect any movement until at least the spring. The Democratic convention — where the platform is approved — will take place from Aug. 19-22 in Chicago.

One key question is who will serve on the committee. The Democratic National Committee chair has final say and is ultimately responsive to the president. But in 2016 and 2020, Democrats included activists from the party's progressive wing on the committee to placate progressive Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT).

"In 2016 there was a sharp division," said one Democratic activist and DNC member who was on the platform committee in 2012. Sanders-appointed members included Zogby and Cornel West, a professor with a history of hostility toward Israel who is now running as a Green Party candidate. The result: heated drafting sessions but few major changes to the platform. For the first time, the 2016 Democratic platform condemned the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.

The 2020 platform looked slightly different. That was the first year the Democratic platform expressed the party's opposition to Israeli efforts to annex the West Bank and to expand settlements, although the platform drafting committee in 2020 voted down an amendment that would have mentioned the "Israeli occupation." The measure was backed by J Street, the left-wing Israel advocacy organization that has been a leader in efforts to push Democrats to the left on Israel.

"We also have space created because of groups like J Street and others who have

opened up the process, that the party has to be very responsive," said Zogby, who plans to push for next year's platform to include support for conditioning American aid to Israel, a controversial policy supported by J Street and some progressive members of Congress.

A spokesperson for J Street declined to say whether the group will take a role in the 2024 platform writing.

"Back in 2020, for some unexplained reason, the Biden folks felt that they needed to have, like, a unity commission," said one Democrat who used to hold senior roles at the party's conventions. "Basically, even though they resoundingly beat Bernie Sanders, they had to, like, almost do parity and bring all these lefty people onto all these committees. So the question is, are they gonna do that again?"

Halie Soifer, CEO of the Jewish Democratic Council for America, said she does not expect any major Israel-related changes.

"In 2024, the goal of Democrats is to reelect the president, so the platform is going to continue to reflect the president's policies," said Soifer, who pointed out that the 2020 platform is broadly pro-Israel — calling for billions of dollars in annual security assistance, supporting Israel's right to defend itself and advocating for a two-state solution. "I don't foresee a lot of opportunities for dramatic change, nor do I see controversy around the Israel portion of this platform."

According to one former party leader, the position is simple: "I am sure everything possible will be done so that there's no fight over it, because everybody agrees that if there's a fight about Israel, everybody loses," said Susie Turnbull, a former DNC vice chair.

“Are the most liberal members of Congress going to complain? Maybe, but it’s not going to mean anything in terms of the platform,” said Steve Rabinowitz, a former Clinton administration senior staffer who now runs a PR firm in Washington.

Of course, a desire to avoid controversy does not always make it so. In 2012, a year that was supposed to be smooth sailing at the convention to support former President Barack Obama’s reelection campaign, the platform draft that made it to the floor had scrapped a previous reference to Jerusalem as the eternal capital of Israel. (It also lacked any mention of the word “God,” another change from 2008.)

A vote was held on the floor of the Charlotte NBA arena, where convention events were being held. Loud booing was

heard when those two clauses were added back in. The voice vote was taken three times until the convention chair declared that it had passed.

The Democratic activist who served on the platform committee that year said they felt “everlasting embarrassment” about failing to notice the omission before the platform reached the floor.

The Times of Israel called it “the night the Democrats lost control of the Israel message.”

It’s too early for detailed conversations about the platform, but there are some hints of new ways in which the platform might address Israel. The 2016 U.S.-Israel Memorandum of Understanding, which lays out a 10-year plan for American financial assistance to Israel, expires in 2026 and will

have to be renegotiated before then — so that might appear in the platform.

“Some things have changed since 2020,” said JDCA’s Soifer. “The situation in Israel has evolved and it remains to be seen whether the platform would address some current events such as judicial overhaul in Israel or questions regarding the future of Israel’s democracy.”

Rabinowitz said he will be watching “to see how much it talks about regional peace, the Abraham Accords-plus, ‘plus’ being code for Saudi Arabia. That might be interesting and maybe the slightest bit controversial.” Many progressives are skeptical of Biden’s efforts to normalize ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and even centrist pro-Israel Democrats have raised questions about proposed concessions to Saudi Arabia. ♦

SEPTEMBER 15, 2023

One side of Saudi normalization to watch for: The Riyadh World Expo 2030 campaign

It’s unclear if Saudi Arabia would allow Israeli participation if it is named as host of the international gathering

By Lahav Harkov

The campaign to host the 2030 World Expo — the contemporary version of the World’s Fair — is heating up, with the vote set for November.

Israel’s vote remains an open question. An Italian delegation came to Jerusalem in late August to make the case for Rome to Foreign Ministry officials, and South Korea has put out feelers in Israel for a vote for Busan to be the host city.

The Expo vote decision, which would typically stay within the Foreign Ministry’s purview, climbed further up the ladder to the Prime Minister’s Office, due to the third city campaigning to host Expo 2030 being Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and the timing as Israel-Saudi normalization talk heats up.

When Saudi Arabia submitted its bid to host the 2030 expo, Crown Prince

Mohammed bin Salman told the Bureau International des Expositions that it would “coincide with the culmination of the Kingdom’s Vision 2030,” in which the prince aims to diversify its economy and open it up to tourists from around the world.

Former Israeli National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat, today head of the Misgav Institute for National Security and Zionist Strategy, said that, in line with Vision 2020, the Expo would be a platform for Saudi Arabia to “present its rich historic and cultural heritage, together with the great social and economic changes it has achieved thus far in pursuit of its strategy of dramatic modernization.”

When the United Arab Emirates announced in 2019 that it would allow Israelis into Expo 2020, it was a major public

step toward diplomatic relations between Abu Dhabi and Jerusalem, who would go on to normalize ties the following year. Yet it remains unclear whether Riyadh would allow active Israeli participation if it hosts the Expo in 2030.

Israeli representatives received an invitation to the Riyadh 2030 launch event in Paris in June, leading to media speculation that Israel planned to support the Saudi bid. However, just days later, the Israelis were turned away at the door from the Paris event hosted by the crown prince and were told they had been removed from the guest list. The event took place on the same day as an IDF anti-terrorism raid in Jenin, which the Saudi Foreign Ministry condemned as “aggression...which led to killing innocent victims.”

On Sunday, two high-ranking Israeli Foreign Ministry officials attended a UNESCO conference in Riyadh, making them the first Israeli diplomats to make a public visit to Saudi Arabia — potentially a sign of warming relations. At the same time, Saudi Arabia was required to sign an agreement to allow all U.N. member states to attend the education, science, and culture organization's event. But not every Israeli diplomat was welcome: the Saudis reportedly blocked Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen and Education Minister Yoav Kisch from attending.

When President Joe Biden and other world leaders announced on the sidelines of the G20 summit in New Delhi over the weekend that they plan to launch an international project to link South Asia and Europe via the Middle East, both Israel and Saudi Arabia were named partners in the initiative. However, the sides are not expected to communicate directly, and diplomatic sources told *Jewish Insider* that the U.S. would be coordinating their moves.

In between all of these government initiatives, two teams of Israeli gamers, playing under an Israeli flag, participated in esports tournaments in Riyadh.

All of these events create a pattern by which the Saudis are able to tolerate Israelis' presence, but unwilling to allow any high-

profile figures or connections that would be seen as real normalization measures.

If Riyadh openly courts Israel's vote or says it would allow an Israeli pavilion, the move — much like when the UAE did so — could be seen as a major milestone on the way to normalization.

Israel's invitation to the Riyadh 2030 event "could be a diplomatic signal, an expression of intent...or the lifting of a curtain ahead of the big thing, and the first public steps are more comfortable to take in an international conference than in a smaller bilateral framework," Ben-Shabbat said.

However, he said, Israel should not overstate the invitation's significance. Ultimately, it was clear that "the hosts have additional considerations."

Israel will have a difficult choice in November, Ben-Shabbat added.

Brian Katulis, vice president of policy at the Middle East Institute, thought that Saudi Arabia has a good chance at winning the Expo vote.

"Today's Saudi Arabia sees itself operating on the global playing field with a multi-dimensional approach. It's not what it used to be, it's much more sophisticated," Katulis said. "So I give them a good shot on things like trying to hold more international conferences and sports competitions,

because it has invested in building the relationships and the diplomatic capacity to position itself as a regional hub and a global player with a diversity of relationships."

That does not necessarily mean welcoming Israel, however.

Diplomatic missteps of the past decade have made Riyadh more cautious, Katulis said.

"Their lessons learned from moving too quickly without thinking things through more carefully during that 2013-2020 period is one of the reasons why I suspect the possible normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia might take a bit more time, but we'll see," he said. "There's a stronger 'look before you leap' impulse these days."

Ben-Shabbat said that "the chances of normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia never looked higher. Every one of the leaders has good reasons to want it."

Recent positive signals from the Saudis pertaining to Israel show that they are ready to make a move, Ben-Shabbat posited.

"The window of opportunity, limited to a few months, must push them to accelerate the discussions and exhaust their options to be flexible on controversial matters... The question now is not if there will be an agreement, but what price each side will pay for it," he stated. ♦

SEPTEMBER 14, 2023

How is Tuberville's military promotion blockade impacting the Middle East?

The promotions the Alabama senator is blocking include senior officials throughout the CENTCOM region as well as multiple members of the joint chiefs of staff

By Marc Rod

Sen. Tommy Tuberville (R-AL) shows no signs of relenting on his monthslong blockade of more than 300 military promotions — a situation that analysts warn could have severe repercussions for

American military efforts throughout the world, including in the Middle East.

Tuberville has been singlehandedly blocking the fast-track, unanimous confirmation of military promotions for

months — the usual procedure by which such nominations are processed, skipping votes and extended floor debate — in protest of the Pentagon's abortion travel policy. According to the nonpartisan Congressional

Research Service, it would take the Senate more than 689 hours of floor time to individually consider and vote on the pending promotions. Tuberville's actions have garnered bipartisan criticism on and off the Hill.

Tuberville's "hold" is impacting senior appointments within Central Command (CENTCOM), the U.S. military forces in the Middle East, such as the deputy commander of CENTCOM, the reserve vice commander of CENTCOM, the deputy commander of CENTCOM naval forces, the deputy commander of CENTCOM air forces, the deputy director of strategy, plans and policy for CENTCOM, and the commanders of U.S. air wings based in Jordan and the United Arab Emirates.

It's also freezing top-level military promotions, including the nominees to be the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, army chief of staff, chief of naval operations and Marine Corps commandant.

Without the requisite officials in place, analysts said that CENTCOM officials could struggle to cement relationships and secure meetings with key counterparts in key partner countries in the region, a serious detriment at a time when the U.S. seeks to grow its unilateral and multilateral partnerships in the region.

"In many places, in many countries, in many relationships, that rank and prestige matter," Bradley Bowman, the senior director of the Center on Military and Political Power at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and a former advisor to multiple Senate Republicans, told *Jewish Insider*. "Whether that meeting happens, whether their interlocutors take them seriously depends on some of those perceptions."

He emphasized that naval forces in the region have proven to be a very effective deterrent to Iranian malign behavior in the Gulf, arguing that Tuberville's actions could distract military leaders from undertaking such efforts and further advancing combined naval strength.

Jonathan Lord, the director of the Middle East Security Program at the Center for a New American Security and a former staff member for the House Armed Services Committee, added that it's "hard to overstate what role these individuals" at the

deputy commander levels "play on a day-to-day [basis] in coordinating with partners in the care and feeding of the defense diplomatic relationships that we have with the host countries that host our forces, with which we do partner exercises, for all the coordinated planning we do. Those are incredibly important positions."

Bowman noted that the holds have also left military commanders and units in limbo.

"The readiness impact of leadership uncertainty is difficult to measure, but very real," Bowman said. "And anyone who blows that off is someone who doesn't understand the way military units operate."

Given the global threat picture, which Bowman called the most "comprehensive" and "daunting" in his lifetime, including ongoing threats from Iran, "this is just the worst possible time" to have senior military ranks in flux, he said.

"I'm sure [Iran] see[s] this, these developments, and they're very happy about it," Bowman continued, referring both to Tuberville's holds as well as what he described as insufficient defense budgets and other congressional budgetary issues.

At the same time, Bowman noted that there are detailed war plans and contingency plans in place, as well as strong chains of command and succession that can continue to function even without confirmed leadership.

Lord said that the Tuberville situation will be viewed "both by partners and our adversaries as weakness and potential instability... [it] does not inspire confidence [with] our military partners," and is a "gift to our adversaries."

"It's really quite impactful on the overall defense establishment in ways that are truly transformative that we've really never seen before," Lord said. "So it's, it's almost hard to take the full measure of just how damaging this is to decision-making, not just in the CENTCOM region, but globally."

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the service chiefs provide critical guidance to the various branches of the military and serve as critical decision-makers and advisers, he explained, a situation which could undermine the U.S. response in the event of a crisis situation with Iran or another adversary.

"If there is no leadership, if there is no C-suite in times of great crisis, it absolutely would have an impact," Lord said. "Of course the military is an organization that is adaptable and seeks to overcome no matter what circumstances, but you'd be very hard-pressed to make an argument... that this would not be a challenge. And certainly most frustrating is that it's a challenge that is wholly unnecessary."

Both Lord and Bowman also warned that Tuberville is setting a dangerous precedent and politicizing apolitical military positions.

"He's punishing members of the military for a policy they don't control," Bowman said. "And I think that's a horrible precedent, a horrible approach that hurts our troops at a time when they need our full support to deter an extraordinary array of threats from abroad."

Lord said that the move marks "a new bottom of political behavior... where it seems there is real bipartisan concern about what type of precedent this sets." ♦

Franklin Foer's new Biden book portrays a Washington that still works — for now

Struggling to find a new angle on the Biden presidency, Foer reached the conclusion that the lifelong politician knew how to make politics work

By Gabby Deutch

As a lifelong Washingtonian, the journalist and author Franklin Foer grew up in a family and in a city that believed a functioning political system could be a force for good.

But by the time President Joe Biden was sworn in on Jan. 20, 2021, American democracy was barely hanging on, weeks after an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol that threatened the peaceful transfer of power. At the time, Foer was under contract to write a book on the Biden presidency — and struggling to find something new to say about Biden, an elder statesman who had made a decades-long career out of politics.

After observing the transition to the Biden administration, Foer came to a very Washington conclusion: “As I watched that, I thought, ‘Well, maybe there is a lot of benefit to having experience, and people with experience, who understood the mechanics of government on some sort of deeper level,’” he told *Jewish Insider* in an interview last week.

The result is *The Last Politician: Inside Joe Biden's White House and the Struggle for America's Future*, Foer's book chronicling Biden's first two years in office, which was published last week. In it, *The Atlantic* staff writer presents a picture of a presidential administration that is functional and even successful, at a time when many Americans think of government as deeply dysfunctional.

Unlike many of the books and magazine articles written about the Trump presidency, this book is not a gossip account of the lives of West Wing staffers, or the ins-and-outs of political relationships. It's about actual governing. (Foer acknowledged the influence of his father, who worked for the Federal Trade Commission, where

Foer learned to think of civil servants as “basically honorable people who were doing their best for the common good.”) Biden did not give Foer an interview.

“After the Trump administration, I think that I did turn to this book a little bit as a tonic, to be able to portray government in a way that I think made government as interesting and exciting and tense and dramatic as it can be,” said Foer. “It's my idealistic hope that the example of having a substantively successful politician might change the way in which people think about the vocation of politics, but that's a pretty idealistic hope.”

He points to a bipartisan gun bill passed in 2022 and that year's CHIPS and Science Act as examples of Biden's political know-how. The strongest example, in Foer's telling, is the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act, billed as a response to the climate crisis.

Foer maintains that Biden has managed to largely stave off — at least for a few years — what felt at times like an inevitable descent into political chaos and rampant partisanship. He has also helped the Democratic Party punt on some of the major questions about its future, as the party's moderate and progressive wings have largely reached a truce under Biden.

“Biden has done a pretty good job within the Democratic Party of cooling some of the cultural tensions,” Foer said. “I assume if Biden stepped aside — which I don't think is exceedingly likely, but let's say he did step aside — I think that we have no idea what way a Democratic primary would evolve [and] what sort of tensions would spring to the fore.”

Take, for instance, the Democratic Party's approach to Israel.

“Biden came from a different generation

than his foreign policy team,” Foer writes. “He grew up in a world where most Americans, especially liberals, regarded Israel as both a historical miracle and a sympathetic underdog.”

Foer recounts the story of Biden's first time meeting Nancy Pelosi in the 1970s: “She was helping a San Francisco neighbor organize a fundraiser for Israel. Biden was the keynote speaker. Pelosi loaned her Jeep, for the sake of squiring Biden around town so that he could extol the case for Zionism.”

But, Foer adds, “Over the past decade, mainstream Democrats had begun to drift from their elders on the subject of Israel. They didn't regard it as quite the same sacred commitment.”

One chapter chronicles the brief but intense conflict between Israel and Hamas in 2021, which Foer said “provided a real window into Biden and to the way that Biden conducts foreign policy and the way that he thinks about foreign leaders, and the way that he developed relationships.”

Biden leaned on his decades-long friendship with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to eventually push the Israeli premier to accept a cease-fire. Biden did not outwardly show any frustration with Netanyahu.

In the two years since, that has changed. Biden has publicly criticized Netanyahu's controversial judicial reform plans.

“I actually think the pressure he's putting on Bibi now grows out of his own Zionism,” said Foer. “I think everything he's done in the last year, he's doing, essentially, in the name of Israeli democracy.” (Foer then paused and questioned whether this “sounds like a naive take.”)

In Foer's recounting of Biden's foreign policy travails, the botched American

pullout from Afghanistan and Washington's crucial support for the Ukrainian war effort against Russia are connected.

In August 2021, there was "a sense that U.S. credibility had taken almost a permanent beating, that we abandoned our allies, that we looked weak," said Foer.

"All that stuff is morally true," he added. "But I think that the long-term strategic effects of the withdrawal were probably overhyped in the immediate aftermath, and you could even make an argument that if we were still in Afghanistan, we wouldn't have been able to free up all the resources to make the Ukrainian armament possible."

Ukraine is a nation and a cause that is close to Foer's heart. He first visited the country more than two decades ago, while reporting his 2004 book *How Soccer Explains the World*. Later, his family's journey to track down their Jewish history in Ukraine was twice immortalized in writing, first in his brother Jonathan Safran

Foer's 2002 novel *Everything Is Illuminated*, and later in his mother Esther Safran Foer's 2020 memoir *I Want You to Know We're Still Here*. (*The Atlantic's* Editor-in-Chief Jeffrey Goldberg called the Foers "America's leading literary family"; Foer's other brother, Joshua, wrote *Moonwalking with Einstein* and founded Atlas Obscura, as well as the Jewish text website Sefaria.)

"Over time, I grew up with my grandmother telling me that Ukrainians were dangerous people, to having this more complicated relationship, which ultimately became one of reconciliation with Ukraine, and then deep, abiding love for the country," Foer said.

His book reaches a largely positive conclusion about Biden's performance since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022: "With Ukraine, the advantages of having an older president were on display. He wasn't just a leader of the coalition, he was the West's father figure, whom foreign leaders could

call for advice and look to for assurance," Foer writes. "He was a man for his age."

Foer's book takes up the matter of Biden's age — he is the oldest sitting president — but largely brushes aside concerns about it. One passage, about a press conference Biden held after a year in office to "put to bed all the swirling speculation about his age and diminishing mental powers," called Biden's real challenges "his indiscipline and imprecision" rather than "age or acuity."

Biden "will be remembered as the old hack who could," Foer writes. But his central argument will be tested next year, as Biden faces a potential rematch against former President Donald Trump, a man whose entire political persona rests on his opposition to the Washington brand of politics as normal. Early polling suggests Biden's reelection is far from a sure thing.

"If he loses to Trump," Foer told *J*, "it'll make the stuff that I wrote about look a little bit more like a footnote." ♦

SEPTEMBER 13, 2023

VP Harris: 'Blast of the shofar' presents a 'wake up call'

A Rosh Hashanah reception at the vice president's residence featured a kosher menu designed by Adeena Sussman and a performance by Regina Spektor

By Gabby Deutch

New Year's celebrations unofficially kicked off on Tuesday evening at the U.S. Naval Observatory in Washington, where Vice President Kamala Harris hosted a poolside Rosh Hashanah reception in conjunction with the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies.

Roughly 150 attendees including rabbis, senators, activists, Jewish communal professionals and actors — notably "Will and Grace" star Debra Messing and comedian Alex Edelman — mingled over a menu of

kosher passed hors d'oeuvres designed by cookbook author Adeena Sussman, whose new Shabbat-themed cookbook was published last week. Sussman's lamb kebabs and tahini blondies were a hit among attendees.

Before Harris and Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff delivered remarks, musician Regina Spektor played an acoustic piano rendition of "Avinu Malkeinu," a prayer recited on the High Holy Days. Spektor, who came to the United States as a child from the Soviet Union, commented on how she still feels a

thrill upon seeing so many people wearing *kippot*. (The CEO of HIAS, which helped resettle Spektor's family, quickly beelined to her after her short set.)

Emhoff and Harris touted the Biden administration's efforts to combat hate and its national action plan to counter antisemitism to great applause.

"This is one of those times in the history of our country and the world, where we are being presented with a wake up call — the blast of the shofar — to challenge ourselves, to ask, 'What are we doing? What can we do?'

And know that we can do so much,” said Harris.

“We’re dealing with some very powerful forces that are attempting to wage, I think a full-on attack against hard-won freedom [and] liberty, and it is important for us to then be clear eyed about what is happening and what is at stake, and agree that we can do something about it,” she continued.

Praising her “beloved Dougie” for his work “fighting hate in all of its forms, and in particular antisemitism,” Harris called on attendees to continue to stand up against hate in all forms.

“I think of this moment as being clear-eyed that in some ways, there is a venom coursing through our country. And we are the antidote. It is us who in this moment are

prepared to rise and do what is important to unify our country and to bring us together and not allow forces to divide us,” said Harris.

“During the season of reflection, where we then think about where we are in preparation for a sweet new year, that is how I think about the job that is before us, knowing we are prepared and equipped to do all that is necessary,” she added, turning to Adas Israel Congregation’s Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt, who had spoken prior to her. “The Talmud — Rabbi, if I may quote — ‘it is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.’”

Emhoff, who has made fighting antisemitism a key focus of his tenure, described his travels this year to Poland and

Germany, and to his old Jewish summer camp in Pennsylvania.

“Rosh Hashanah is a time to reflect, not only on the past year, but on what we hope to do in the next one. So this coming year, I’m committed to doing even more, pushing back even more, building more coalitions and bringing more people together in this fight with us, this fight that affects all of us,” said Emhoff. “I also want to remind you all: It’s great to be Jewish. Live with joy. Live with happiness. Live with passion. And enjoy that food.”

On the way out, attendees received a classic Rosh Hashanah gift — a jar of honey — adorned with the vice presidential seal. ♦

SEPTEMBER 10, 2023

UAE’s Ocean Harvest plans salmon farming in the desert

The company with agtech roots has a new CEO, an initial fundraising target of \$180 million and an ambitious blueprint

By Kelsey Warner

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

Five years after Pure Harvest pulled in its first hydroponically grown tomato crop, setting the Abu Dhabi-based company on a path to becoming one of the Gulf’s biggest agtech firms, co-founder Robert Kupstas is ready to grow something different: fish.

The entrepreneur’s latest venture, Ocean Harvest, which he founded in 2021, has raised \$2.1 million in seed funding, set up shop one floor away from Pure Harvest’s offices and hired an industry veteran in aquaculture. Last month the company named a new CEO, venture capitalist Jawad Jamil, making a team of three that is ready for the next phase: a Series A fundraising round with a \$180 million target of mixed equity and debt. The money will go to fund

a 100,000-square-meter facility planned in the northern emirate of Ras Al Khaimah and later expansion into Saudi Arabia and markets in Asia.

“We’re looking for strategic investors, sovereign wealth funds, impact investors [and] infrastructure investors because we need those kinds of shareholders,” Jamil told *The Circuit*. “They are the ones who are not just looking at pure financial returns ... getting my 3x, 5x [returns] and getting out. They have the understanding, the patience that is required to understand the intricacies of building such complicated infrastructure. And there’s more at play.”

Indeed there is: The UAE imports 90% of its food and agriculture contributes less than 0.1% to GDP, according to a 2023 government report.

Mariam Hareb Almheiri, minister of

climate change and environment, has called aquaculture “a core component of the UAE’s national food security strategy”.

Growing salmon in the desert is not all that outlandish — the UAE has been making forays into the booming fish farming industry in recent years.

The first UAE-raised salmon hit grocery stores in 2019 from Dubai start-up Fish Farm, which last year signed a major distribution deal with ASMAK, a UAE seafood conglomerate with operations across the Middle East and North Africa region. In 2021, Abu Dhabi Investment Office lured one of the largest indoor salmon producers in the world, private equity-backed Pure Salmon, to move its headquarters from Singapore to Abu Dhabi to develop more inland salmon production in the UAE.

Demand for seafood is high in the UAE

and Ocean Harvest believes there's enough room at the table for multiple players.

Annual per capita fish consumption is the highest in the Gulf Cooperation Council and almost 50% above the global average of 45 pounds per capita. While the UAE's aquaculture ventures go beyond salmon farming, salmon is the country's second-most consumed fish, nearly all of it flown in from colder climates, according to Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank.

In the same way Pure Harvest flew over ladybugs, bumblebees and tomato seedlings from Holland to propagate its first crop, Ocean Harvest will buy salmon eggs from Norway, Iceland and Denmark, carried on planes in styrofoam boxes to start the Ras Al Khaimah hatchery.

Ocean Harvest is using a popular method for fish farming, known as a recirculating aquaculture system.

The plan is to raise salmon without using antibiotics or pesticides, common additions to farm environments to combat parasites

and bacteria from fish feces.

Bruno Sardenberg, who is overseeing the Ocean Harvest project and then will manage production operations once open, believes it can be done. Water from the tanks will be recirculated every 30 minutes, cleaned by a system developed by French water treatment company Suez.

The timeline is ambitious. Ocean Harvest hopes to raise its Series A funding round and begin commercial-scale operations at its first hatchery by 2026. The salmon will be mature enough for sale by 2028, when it is targeting 3,500 metric tons of fish in phase one, with a staff of 50 at the farming site. Within five years, Ocean Harvest is aiming to expand to 6,000 tons of fish and 85 employees.

The startup has lined up "take-or-pay" off-take contracts, meaning the customers buy the stock when it becomes available or face a fine, with four customers for 82% of phase one and is eyeing hotels, airlines and grocery stores as potential customers, in addition to the seafood distributors it has

already signed deals with. It has forecast revenue in 2028 of \$35.6 million. By 2030, it expects revenue of \$43 million.

Amid the current market downturn and muted venture capital activity, these fundamentals are important, Kupstas, an American who got his master's in international policy from Stanford, said.

The timing is difficult for the co-founder.

"I started working on the idea for Pure Harvest 10 years ago," he said. "I think we're all ready to see some personal reward from that investment."

But for now, there are no plans to take Pure Harvest, which has raised \$387.1 million in venture capital, public. Kupstas expressed relief over not merging with a blank check company during the SPAC wave three years ago.

"We're fortunate in that both companies have runway," he said. "I think we just need to keep our heads down and just deliver on fundamentals." ♦