

THE WEEKLY PRINT

US groups laud Israel's entry into the Visa Waiver Program, say it heralds deeper ties; Menendez's legal woes could reshape direction of Democratic foreign policy; Israel's new antisemitism envoy primed for battle in 'ongoing war'; Netanyahu's foreign policy achievements overshadowed by domestic tumult; Israeli ambassador: Protest against Iran exposed U.N.'s 'distorted moral compass'; Congress examines paths for ending Palestinian Authority's 'pay for slay'; Bringing Holocaust education into the Metaverse; and Drone air-taxis conduct test flights over Jerusalem.

SEPTEMBER 28, 2023

US groups laud Israel's entry into the Visa Waiver Program, say it heralds deeper ties

Left-leaning groups raise concerns about Israel's commitment to 'reciprocity,' which has been a sticking point in the process

By Haley Cohen

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Israeli citizens looking to visit the U.S. for family weddings and bar mitzvahs, for vacations or for short-term programs would first have to face a lengthy and costly visa process, if they were lucky enough to get an appointment to apply, which in the post-COVID-19 era was no small feat — and still face the possibility of rejection.

But no more. On Wednesday, Israel became the 41st country to enter the coveted U.S. Visa Waiver Program, joining nations like the United Kingdom, Japan and

Germany. By the end of November, Israelis will be able to travel to the U.S. for fewer than three months without a visa.

Dozens of American Jewish groups and leaders congratulated Israel on its entry into the program and said the move would benefit both countries, though some organizations and politicians also expressed concern about the implementation, saying Israel is discriminating against different groups of Americans traveling to the country.

The leaders of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations — the umbrella group's chair Harriet Schleifer and its CEO, William Daroff

— commended the decision in a statement on Wednesday, calling the move, which they said will “bring tangible benefits to both American and Israeli citizens,” a “long overdue” step.

“The relatives of Jewish Americans in Israel,” they added, “will no longer be forced to go through a lengthy, expensive, and cumbersome process to visit their families. Additionally, Israel's entry into the Visa Waiver Program reduces barriers to commerce between American and Israeli entrepreneurs, enhancing American firms' competitiveness in key sectors such as AI and Semiconductors.”

Elana Broitman, the outgoing senior vice president of public affairs at the Jewish Federations of North America, told *eJewishPhilanthropy* the move “means a lot for federations and the community [including] camps and synagogues,” which bring Israelis to American Jewish communities to teach and participate in short-term programs. (Israelis participating in longer-term and paid programs, like those serving as Jewish Agency emissaries, will still require a visa.)

“The designation of Israel into the Visa Waiver Program is an important recognition of our shared security interests and the close cooperation between our two countries,” Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas, who made the announcement with Secretary of State Tony Blinken, said in a statement.

Blinken added, “This important achievement will enhance freedom of movement for U.S. citizens, including those living in the Palestinian Territories or traveling to and from them.”

Israel has sought to join the program for more than a decade. While it met two of the key criteria, the final roadblock was Israel’s practice of regularly barring Arab and Palestinian Americans from entering the country—and the West Bank—through Ben Gurion Airport, which violated reciprocity requirements. (Israel maintained that this was necessary as a security precaution, and Israeli security services have raised concerns about the implications of ending the practice.)

The push for the visa waiver emerged following meetings between then-Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and President Joe Biden in 2021. From there, the two countries worked to remove Israel’s barriers to entry through legislation and protocol changes.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday expressed appreciation “to U.S. President Joe Biden for his support of the initiative, which will further strengthen ties between the two peoples.”

Daniel Elbaum, head of The Jewish Agency for Israel North America, told *eJP* that his organization “applauds the decision which we believe will strengthen ties between Israelis and Americans,” while also

praising former U.S. Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides, who, Elbaum said, “worked tirelessly to make this happen.”

Hadassah National President Rhoda Smolow and CEO Naomi Adler said the removal of the visa barrier would “make it easier for doctors at [Israel’s] Hadassah Medical Organization to collaborate with US colleagues to advance shared goals, share best practices face-to-face and advance critical medical research.”

The Orthodox Union applauded the announcement as well, calling it a reflection of the “unique bond” between the U.S. and Israel.

Rabbi Moshe Hauer, the group’s executive vice president, said in a statement, “Israel and America have an enduring relationship built on their shared democratic values and continue to grow their cooperation in military, diplomatic, technological, and economic matters. The admission of Israel into the Visa Waiver Program reaffirms that unique bond while delivering a meaningful, practical benefit, enabling greater connection between the citizens of both countries.”

Herbert Block, executive director of the American Zionist Movement (AZM), said he was hopeful that Israel’s inclusion “will facilitate many professional, business, medical, academic, and cultural exchanges while also enhancing personal connections and family ties between Americans and Israelis.”

In a post on X, the Israel Policy Forum said that the program “is predicated on the principle of full reciprocity,” referring to Israel’s requirement to allow the entry of all Americans, including those of Palestinian and Arab descent.

“We are glad Israel has achieved this standard and look forward to it being maintained long after the announcement of this decision has passed,” IPF said.

J Street, a progressive Israel advocacy group frequently critical of Netanyahu and his government, said in a statement that while it was “pleased that travel between the two countries will now be easier for most of each other’s citizens,” it has concerns about the implementation of the program, saying that “the Visa Waiver Program’s requirements are being bent and adjusted to accommodate Israel in a way that they have

not been for other countries.”

J Street called on the U.S. to “monitor and enforce the obligations that Israel is undertaking with the utmost seriousness.”

The decision was also met with criticism from a handful of Democratic U.S. lawmakers. Sens. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), Brian Schatz (D-HI), Jeff Merkley (D-OR) and Peter Welch (D-VT) issued a statement on Wednesday saying that the Biden administration’s announcement is in violation of the central principle of the Visa Waiver Program, noting reciprocity between Israel and the U.S. in how they treat each other’s citizens.

“Adherence to this important American tenet of reciprocity and equal treatment of all US citizens is critical to the integrity of the Visa Waiver Program, and we are deeply concerned with the Administration’s decision to move forward in violation of that principle,” the senators said. ♦

Menendez's legal woes could reshape direction of Democratic foreign policy

Menendez's long-term successor as ranking Democrat atop the Senate Foreign Relations Committee may not be as supportive of Israel

By Marc Rod

More than half of Senate Democrats have called on Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ) to resign since his indictment on Friday on federal corruption charges over alleged transactions with Egyptian businessmen and government officials.

The New Jersey Democrat's legal troubles could spur a major shake-up in the direction of his party's foreign policy. Menendez, who is temporarily stepping down as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has been a Democratic hawk and a pro-Israel stalwart. There will likely be competition for the top Democratic spot on the committee between lawmakers with different views on international affairs.

Menendez has maintained his innocence, and has vowed to fight the charges while remaining in the Senate. But Menendez faced a huge political blow on Tuesday when one of his closest allies, Sen. Cory Booker (D-NJ), called on him to resign amid growing Democratic condemnation. Booker served as a character witness at Menendez's first corruption trial, which ended in a mistrial.

"Senator Menendez fiercely asserts his innocence and it is therefore understandable that he believes stepping down is patently unfair. But I believe this is a mistake," Booker said in a statement. "Stepping down is not an admission of guilt but an acknowledgment that holding public office often demands tremendous sacrifices at great personal cost... I believe stepping down is best for those Senator Menendez has spent his life serving."

As of Tuesday evening, 26 Senate Democrats had called for Menendez to step down, representing a diverse ideological cross-section of the caucus. Nearly all of

those facing competitive reelections called on Menendez to resign. The list also includes a member of Democratic leadership, Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), and the chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, Sen. Gary Peters (D-MI).

Menendez has thus far remained defiant, maintaining his innocence, blaming the charges on misrepresentations and claiming that he is the target of a long-running smear campaign, in part because of his Latino heritage.

On Friday, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) announced that Menendez would temporarily step aside as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, a position from which he has been a powerful ally of the pro-Israel community and a strong skeptic of the Biden administration's efforts at diplomacy with Iran.

In the short term, Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD) will assume the chairmanship — as he did during Menendez's first indictment — a Senate source told *Jewish Insider* on Tuesday evening. Cardin is another longtime ally of the pro-Israel community who, like Menendez, broke with his party to vote against the Iran nuclear deal.

Cardin was the first senator, outside of Schumer, to issue a statement on Menendez's indictment on Thursday, in which he did not call for Menendez to resign.

"I encourage everyone to allow the legal process to move forward without prejudice," Cardin said. "Senator Menendez has a right to respond aggressively in court to the current charges, and I am confident that he will do so."

Menendez's leave from his role atop the Foreign Relations Committee could have a far-reaching impact on U.S. foreign policy; the senator, who at times butted heads

with the Biden administration, was seen as holding significant influence over its foreign policy.

The leadership shake-up could also interrupt the timeline for Jack Lew's confirmation process as U.S. ambassador to Israel. It also creates new questions about major issues that could come before the committee, such as votes around a trilateral deal involving the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Israel or renewed efforts to finalize a nuclear deal with Iran.

The charges against Menendez are likely to prompt calls for additional scrutiny of U.S. aid to Egypt, which has been a source of tension between some Democrats and the administration. Congress has, for multiple years, placed conditions on a portion of U.S. military aid to Egypt, but the administration has waived the conditions on the bulk of that aid.

"I would hope that our committee will consider using any ability it has to put a pause on those dollars pending a new inquiry into what Egypt was doing," Sen. Chris Murphy (D-CT), a Foreign Relations Committee member who has called for stricter conditioning of aid to Egypt, told reporters. "As a committee, we now have a responsibility to understand what Egypt was doing and what Egypt thought it was getting. There are serious implications for U.S. policy towards Egypt if, as the indictment suggests, they were trying to use illicit means to curry favor on the committee."

Menendez's suspension as the Foreign Relations Committee chair has been met with celebration from the Turkish government; the senator had exercised his power as committee chair to block sales of advanced fighter jets to Ankara.

"One of our most important problems

regarding the F-16s were the activities of U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez against our country,” Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said. “Menendez’s exit gives us an advantage.”

In the longer term, the Foreign Relations Committee’s leadership could be up for grabs, given that Cardin will retire at the end of 2024. He is followed in seniority on the committee by Sens. Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), Chris Coons (D-DE) and Murphy.

Neither Shaheen nor Coons have commented on Menendez’s indictment, while Murphy has called for Menendez to step down.

Shaheen’s potential leadership of the committee could cause consternation for some pro-Israel advocates, given her occasional criticism of Israeli policy.

Earlier this month, Shaheen signed a letter opposing Israel’s prompt entry into the Visa Waiver Program. She previously joined letters calling for more aggressive U.S. involvement in investigating the killing of Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, warning Israel against annexing portions of the West Bank and urging the administration to block evictions of Palestinians in the West Bank.

Shaheen was not supportive of the Taylor Force Act, and opposed moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, calling the move “harmful to both U.S. and

Israeli interests” and a detriment to Israeli-Palestinian peace. She has, however, been supportive of U.S. aid to Israel.

The New Hampshire senator has been active on issues related to Lebanon, including leading legislation aiming to cut off international financing to Hezbollah and legislation urging the European Union to ramp up pressure on the Iran-backed organization, including fully designating it as a terrorist group.

Coons, a close ally of President Joe Biden, currently serves as the chairman of the Senate Appropriations subcommittee responsible for the State Department and foreign aid. He’s seen as an unofficial representative of Biden on foreign policy, as well as a close AIPAC ally.

Coons has consistently facilitated U.S. aid to Israel from his role on the Appropriations committee; led senators on a 2016 letter supporting a new memorandum of understanding with Israel; led bills codifying that MOU into law in 2020 and extending U.S.-Israel development cooperation; and was a lead sponsor of the Partnership Fund for Peace Act. Coons also supported the Taylor Force Act.

In a glowing statement following Israeli President Isaac Herzog’s recent address to Congress, Coons said, “As today’s dozens of standing ovations showed, support for the U.S.-Israel alliance continues to

be bipartisan and based on a shared commitment to democratic values... Together, I know we’ll ensure that Israel has what it needs to defend itself and carry out mutually beneficial defense, humanitarian, and development projects.”

Taking a similar stance to Biden, Coons has described the protests against the Israeli government’s judicial overhaul efforts as “a real moment of crisis for Israeli democracy” and called for the initiative to be “reconsidered, modified.”

Coons was also critical of the Trump administration’s move to formally recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, saying in a statement that “Jerusalem for 70 years has been the capital of the state of Israel,” but that “President Trump’s decision to formally recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital today appears to be driven more by his desire to fulfill a campaign pledge.”

Murphy, who, given his relative lack of seniority, would likely be a longer shot for the post, is among the most prominent critics of Israeli policy in the Senate. He has floated leveraging aid to Israel in the interest of preserving a two-state solution and pushed to tie supplemental Iron Dome aid to additional aid for the Palestinians. He has also led efforts to cut U.S. military assistance to Saudi Arabia. ♦

SEPTEMBER 28, 2023

Israel’s new antisemitism envoy primed for battle in ‘ongoing war’

Michal Cotler-Wunsh is taking aim at social media companies, Israelis protesting their government abroad and Palestinian hate

By Lahav Harkov

When Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen announced earlier this month that Michal Cotler-Wunsh would be Israel’s special envoy for

combating antisemitism, there was an outpouring of support and well-wishing, but Cotler-Wunsh said her appointment has a big downside.

“People are congratulating me and I want to cry,” she told *Jewish Insider* during an interview in Jerusalem this week. “It’s 2023 and countries need to appoint special

envoys for combating antisemitism... It's not something we should be celebrating. It's a testament to the rise and mainstreaming of antisemitism."

The special envoys in the U.S., Canada, U.K., European Union, Germany and many South American states work together as a coalition, while they each "have a responsibility to make a difference both domestically, advising their own governments...using the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's] working definition of antisemitism, and in the international arena, transcending borders of religions, nations and political partisanship," she said.

Cotler-Wunsh is a lawyer and conflict-resolution expert who spent many hours of her childhood in the hallways of the Knesset where her mother worked for Menachem Begin's Likud party, before they moved to Canada when her mother married human rights attorney and eventual Justice Minister of Canada Irwin Cotler. She was a member of Knesset for the Blue and White party in 2020-2021, where she co-founded the Interparliamentary Task Force to Combat Online Antisemitism, and has dedicated herself to that mission ever since. While in the U.S. State Department, the special envoy role is a Senate-confirmed, ambassador-level position, Cotler-Wunsh is serving Israel on a volunteer basis — as did her predecessor, actress and producer Noa Tishby.

The new envoy plans to continue the work she did in the interparliamentary task force, which held hearings in the U.S. Congress, the European Parliament and the Knesset focused on social media companies.

Cotler-Wunsh explained that at first, legislators did not know the right questions to ask of social media companies. An early error was trying to tackle online antisemitism geographically when social media has no borders. As such, she said, the effort must be international.

She compared the rise of social media to other media revolutions, such as the printing press or radio, which were used to spread calumnies against Jews, but also had broader social effects, while pointing out that social media moves at a much faster pace.

"I try to make this clear when we

engage the tech experts, platforms and parliamentarians from all over the world — Jews and non-Jews. We need to recognize that antisemitism is just a case study. It's not just the way antisemitism is fueled by and fuels real-world hate and violence and thus has to be tracked and understood, it's about the change in the way we consume information," she said.

"We are using yesterday's models in today's reality... Speech on social media is not free; it's very expensive," she continued. "The assumption that we are using the same paradigm as standing on a box in Hyde Park is not relevant. We don't all have the same opportunities to choose freely, because the algorithm or echo chamber created for me is different from the echo chamber for you. Further, recognizing the real-world harm caused by online hate, we have to ask ourselves what unnecessarily shouting 'fire' in a crowded theater means in a digital reality."

Among the most important jobs for a coalition of special envoys to combat antisemitism, Cotler-Wunsh posited, is "to understand that we need to hold social media companies to account for the tremendous power they have. The first order is transparency, when there is a complete lack of transparency."

"Our goal is not to shut down or censor. Our call is for transparency in policy and implementation," she added. One example she gave is that the EU is moving towards demanding "algorithmic transparency," which she called "the beginning of asking the right questions."

Cotler-Wunsh had a follow-up question after watching Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's talk with X (formerly Twitter) owner Elon Musk: "You say you're fighting antisemitism; then how are you doing that?...How do you define antisemitism? We need transparency of policy and that has to include a definition of antisemitism — I would say it should be the IHRA definition, which was the result of a long democratic process, adopted by over 40 countries and 1,000 entities, enabling the comprehensive identification of antisemitism — and requiring transparency of implementation."

Facebook and X have said they remove content denying the Holocaust, but have not

shown any proof that they do so, she said.

While many Jewish organizations have expressed alarm specifically about X since Musk bought the platform last year, "It's not just Twitter that has raging antisemitism on it," she said, adding that it was there before the billionaire took over.

"Politicizing or personalizing antisemitism takes our collective eye off the ball and enables its mutation and permutation," Cotler-Wunsh argued. "It's not about any one individual or platform. It's about the tremendous power that social media companies hold, and the tremendous responsibility that comes with it that they need to be held to account for."

The job of the Jewish state's special envoy for combating antisemitism may seem like one that is entirely focused on international antisemitism, but Cotler-Wunsh said she has her work cut out for her at home.

In one of the first interviews she gave in Hebrew after her appointment was announced, shock-jock Ron Kaufman called Haredim "a cancer" — a term often used by Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to describe Israel.

"This crystallized everything we need to work on," Cotler-Wunsh said. "It was this moment of complete exposure of everything [Israelis] too need to understand about what we don't get about antisemitism. If we don't understand it ourselves, we can't make it accessible to the outside world."

Cotler-Wunsh called for Israeli schools to teach the IHRA definition "as a resource to identify and combat antisemitism rising in the world," and that while Israeli diplomats abroad call on universities to adopt the IHRA definition, Israeli universities should use it, as well.

One of the contemporary forms of antisemitism, trying to turn Zionism into racism and promoting the "demonization, double standards and delegitimization of Israel," as Cotler-Wunsh repeatedly said, quoting Natan Sharansky's "three Ds," is part of a war that has been fought against Israel since the establishment of the state.

"If this is part of the war against Israel's existence, then the Knesset Foreign Affairs

and Defense Committee has to understand antisemitism, the IDF chief of staff has to understand it," she said. "If Israel is demonized and delegitimized, deemed a pariah state, then the world will thank Iran for destroying Israel. There's no justification for what is deemed an apartheid state to exist in this world."

Cotler-Wunsh said the situation is as though Israel is "in absentia in this ongoing war; we don't — and must — have a systematic plan to address this."

"Israel's special envoy is the platform from which not only to engage the outside world but also to equip our decision-makers with a critical understanding, not only in remembering our past, but as we diagnose and address the challenges of now and tomorrow."

Cotler-Wunsh also expressed concern that Israelis and Diaspora Jews protesting against the Israeli government while outside of Israel shows a lack of understanding of the problem of antisemitism.

Projecting the message that Netanyahu is a liar onto the U.N. building, while "the butcher of Tehran is about to speak there, or [Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas] launched an antisemitic tirade with Holocaust denial...shows a lack of understanding that this is an existential war waged against the State of Israel and the Jewish people and gives a semblance legitimacy to the messaging of that war," she said.

In addition, Cotler-Wunsh said that while most Israelis do not believe that the ongoing tensions between them will escalate into a civil war, it is difficult to convey that to Jews outside of Israel. The protests abroad "drive a very hurtful wedge between Israel and global Jewry, where there is a lack of understanding and nuanced conversation."

Israelis do not understand "that Jews around the world actually have a complete sense of catastrophe that their nation-state to which we returned after millennia of persecution is on the brink of civil war. They're borrowing from their own countries... We have challenges but we don't have the challenges America has. Imposing that story on us drives a further wedge between American and Israeli Jewry," she lamented.

The Israeli "disconnect from global

Jewry is a blind spot," Cotler-Wunsh said.

The envoy hopes to serve as a bridge in that respect, "transcending real differences of politics and geography to convey a very clear message of moral clarity, of unity with dignity of difference and of Israel's standing in the international community when international institutions enabled the mutation of antisemitism" that is the three Ds.

One view that Cotler-Wunsh shares with some of the more policy-minded protesters against this government is that Israel's Declaration of Independence should be enshrined in law; she proposed a bill to that effect when she was a member of Knesset. Today, she says it is part of the Jewish state's moral message to the world.

"Israel's Declaration of Independence tells us to opt in and not only be negatively defined by the outside, by hate," she said. "It anchors the values of this country as the nation-state of the Jewish people, an indigenous people who returned after millennia of exile and persecution, and is committed to equality. That commitment is anchored in and 'envisaged by the prophets,' a country whose identity is Jewish and whose mechanism of governance is democratic. At 75 years young, deciphering what that means and looks like is the awesome role and responsibility of our generation."

That being said, when it comes to the judicial reform question, Cotler-Wunsh pointed out that the Declaration "has nothing to say about the relationship of the three branches of government." Rather, "it is the soul and identity — the vision, mission and values."

Cotler-Wunsh said Israel should "use the Declaration of Independence to engage global Jewry, but also to engage Israel's delegitimizers."

For example, she said, "Israel does not exist because the Holocaust happened. It's the opposite. The Holocaust would not have occurred if Israel existed." Rather, the Declaration points to Jews' prototypical indigeneity and connection to Israel throughout Jewish history.

"Until we take back our rightful membership and identity as an indigenous people, a legal concept that has meaning in the court of public opinion in which we have

been sitting in the docket of the accused, we cannot push back against anti-Zionists," she said.

That insight brings Cotler-Wunsh to another message she plans to emphasize internationally: that Palestinian leadership cannot "continue to get a free pass for pure, unbridled antisemitism."

She pointed to "The Palestinian leaders' lack of acceptance of Israel's right to exist as the Jewish state in any borders, their attempted severance of any connection to Jewish history — like the UNESCO decision on Jericho and [UNESCO decisions on] Jerusalem consistently, Abbas wearing a key under his lapel at the U.N.," symbolizing his hope for a return to pre-1967 Israel.

"Antisemitism has to be fought comprehensively," she said. "If one form is allowed to run rampant, then you haven't done anything to address the virus. We know that from COVID — strains mutate and spread. It's not remotely possible to identify and fight antisemitism if you do it selectively, and only do the part that is easy. Holocaust denial is not only low-hanging fruit, it's fruit on the ground."

By enabling Abbas and ignoring rampant antisemitism within Palestinian society, the international community "enabled the continuing, festering antisemitism that not only targets Jewish children and adults with terror, not only enables the abuse of children's rights by inculcating them with hate, but creates an obstacle to fighting antisemitism and to prospective peace with the Palestinian people. Double standards always undermine the entire principle," Cotler-Wunsh said.

Plus, the envoy said, "it's the racism of low expectations."

"I expect the very same principles to apply to everyone. Negating the responsibility that comes with agency... constitutes not only an affront to human rights, but an outright impasse to peace and the prospect of a better future for Palestinians." ♦

Netanyahu's foreign policy achievements overshadowed by domestic tumult

The premier's trip was punctuated by Israeli protesters at every stop, a reminder that the stalled judicial overhaul is draining his political capital to get things done in Israel

By Lahav Harkov

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's week in the U.S. would, under normal circumstances, be considered a successful one for the leader whose campaign ads boasted that he is in "another league" when it comes to foreign affairs.

But despite his many diplomatic deliverables, he couldn't escape his volatile political situation back home. His trip was punctuated by Israeli protesters at every stop, a reminder that the stalled judicial overhaul is draining his political capital to get things done in Israel — with polls showing his right-wing coalition would lose many seats to the opposition, if an election were held now.

The list of Netanyahu's accomplishments on the trip was significant. He met with billionaire Elon Musk, and showcased a sophisticated understanding of the national security implications of AI, both in his one-on-one conversation with Musk and at a subsequent panel featuring Open AI President Greg Brockman and MIT professor Max Tegmark. Senior sources in his delegation said that the billionaire is considering opening a research and development center in Israel, one of Netanyahu's goals for the visit and a potentially big economic achievement.

Then, there were the high-profile diplomatic meetings on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York: President Joe Biden invited Netanyahu to the White House by the end of the year, and promoted the strength of U.S.-Israel ties. Biden added he was optimistic about the prospects for normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia — a top priority for Netanyahu.

Even Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who has not held back criticism of Israel, called his meeting with Netanyahu good. It was the first meeting by any Israeli prime minister with Zelensky since the Russia-Ukraine war started. And Netanyahu's first-ever meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan ended with plans for the leaders to visit each other's capitals.

Netanyahu's U.N. General Assembly speech on Friday will focus on Iran's barring of U.N. nuclear inspectors, hostage diplomacy and other malign acts, as well as the prospects for peace between Israel and Saudi Arabia. His U.N. speeches have typically been memorable — from bringing a cartoon nuclear bomb illustration to underscore the Iranian nuclear threat to rhetorically wagging his finger at the world for double standards against Israel.

These are the kinds of weeks that end up as montages in Likud campaign ads.

But for all the accomplishments abroad, Netanyahu is facing major political headaches back home. The judicial reform issue, his unruly coalition and the protesters against them overshadowed any efforts the prime minister made in the international arena.

Everywhere Netanyahu went this week, the protesters were there: brandishing signs and sounding vuvuzelas at Ben Gurion Airport, at San Jose Airport, at his hotel in San Jose, at his hotel in New York and at Biden's hotel half a mile away. They projected a picture of Netanyahu in an orange prison jumpsuit onto Alcatraz and displayed images of him in the same uniform transplanted into classic paintings outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The protests, even though they were easy for Netanyahu to avoid, were a reminder of lingering questions about the prime minister's stalled judicial overhaul efforts.

By talking to Musk first, Netanyahu attempted to seize control of the narrative.

The billionaire claimed that his Tesla staff complained more about his decision to talk policy with Netanyahu than anything else he had ever done. Unlike in most media interviews with Netanyahu in recent months, the prime minister was able to make his case for judicial reform without interruption or pushback, and once Musk checked that box, he moved on without any further questions.

The tactic of meeting Musk first in order to start the trip to the U.S. on a positive note may have been more successful if Netanyahu hadn't self-sabotaged on the tarmac at Ben Gurion Airport. When reporters asked what he thought about the protesters, he said that he is used to demonstrations against Israel at the U.N., but that these are Israelis "joining up with the PLO and Iran." The remarks set off a firestorm at home while Netanyahu was on the 15-hour flight to California.

In New York, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz asked Netanyahu about the judicial reform issue in private; Biden referred to it obliquely yet obviously in his public remarks.

"We're going to discuss some of the hard issues, that is upholding democratic values that lie at the heart of our partnership, including the checks and balances in our systems and preserving the path to a negotiated two-state solution, and ensuring that Iran never, never acquires a nuclear weapon," Biden said, elevating the state of Israeli democracy to a concern at the level of

core national security issues for Jerusalem.

Netanyahu, for his part, tried to reassure Biden that Israel is and will continue to be a democracy.

Biden invited Netanyahu to the White House later this year, nearly a year after Netanyahu's return to office. The invitation was not previously forthcoming, to the prime minister's great frustration, because of the president's vocal opposition to the judicial reform and concern about extremist figures in Netanyahu's coalition.

Those figures continued to stir up trouble while Netanyahu was away, briefing reporters that they will not allow "a second Oslo" in exchange for peace with the Saudis and praising a murderer of Palestinians.

Senior officials in Netanyahu's delegation

emphasized that the discussion over judicial reform talk took up only a small part of his meetings — but they could not pretend that it wasn't a part of the discussion. And the Israeli media honed in on any word about the domestic strife far more than international affairs.

The polls back home continue to reflect a sharp drop in public approval for this 64-seat coalition, with Channel 13 giving it 53 seats if there were an election last week, and Channel 14 giving it 56 seats. In the Channel 14 poll, Likud dropped from 32 to 30 seats, but on Channel 13, Netanyahu's party fell to 25 seats and would no longer be the largest faction in the Knesset, trailing Benny Gantz's National Unity party.

A senior Israeli diplomatic source

lamented the focus on the judicial reform and opposition to it at home and abroad, pointing to Netanyahu's successful meetings this week and saying that "there is this idea as though we're isolated because of the protests and Israel's position in the world is damaged. That is really untrue."

The reality is that Netanyahu, always adept in the international arena, has been spending a large part of his time trying to find a way out of the judicial overhaul stalemate, about which he has shown little enthusiasm. That has kept him from focusing on what he cares about most: a historic normalization deal with Saudi Arabia, the Iranian threat and bringing more business to Israel. ♦

SEPTEMBER 22, 2023

Israeli ambassador: Protest against Iran exposed U.N.'s 'distorted moral compass'

Gilad Erdan: 'We separate between the people of Iran and the ruthless radical regime that oppresses them'

By Lahav Harkov

Israel's Permanent Representative to the U.N. Gilad Erdan had a viral moment this week that, judging from the news coverage and reactions on his social media, was seen around the world.

When Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi stood in front of the United Nations's green marble wall on Tuesday, ready to begin his speech to the General Assembly, Erdan stood up and held a photo of Mahsa Amini, the woman whose brutal killing by Iran's modesty police a year ago inspired a protest movement in the Islamic republic. U.N. security grabbed Erdan and escorted him out of the room.

From that moment on, Erdan's spokeswoman's phone was bombarded with messages from CNN, Fox News, *The Washington Post*, and more. The video was

viewed over 3 million times on his Instagram alone.

On the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly, the ambassador took time out to speak with *Jewish Insider* about his protest and why the U.N. still matters for Israel.

Lahav Harkov: What sparked your act of protest?

Gilad Erdan: Every year, we decide to leave the GA hall when the leader of the only country that calls publicly to annihilate the Jewish state comes on the podium.

This year, it was on the first day of the high-level week and when I was walking over from my office I saw the very moving exhibition of Iranians against the regime. I posted a few Instagram stories from their

exhibition that was very moving, with photos [of] all the women killed. I spoke with people there, and they saw I was Israeli. I asked if they have one of the signs there, and they said they would help me get the original photo.

I asked someone on my staff to go to Staples to print it out. I didn't want to be stopped on the way in, so we used paper that I could fold easily and I carried it with me.

I felt that really we should highlight to the world the fact that we stand in solidarity with the Iranian people...and say that we separate between the people of Iran and the ruthless radical regime that oppresses them.

LH: Was that a normal reaction by security?

GE: I never expected them to forcibly drag me out. It was crazy that they touched me. I was silent, so I thought maybe they'd say something to me and then I would stop and leave.

When security detained me, I told them that when the war in Ukraine broke out, I remember many ambassadors were holding signs and Ukrainian flags and no one did anything.

It's an anecdote that made the whole story much more interesting, because it showed the world how distorted the moral compass of the U.N. is. They're so pressured to give a mass murderer oppressing his people the red carpet treatment, but the one silently holding up a sign is dragged forcibly outside.

Most of the Arab world covered the story and I received thousands of emails from Iranians across the globe.

LH: *What did Netanyahu think about what you did?*

GE: He was very satisfied. He wanted to visit the [Iranian protesters'] exhibition also, but unfortunately it took place only on the first day, when he was very busy.

Netanyahu is right [to include props in his speeches]. There are so many countries and so many speeches that you have to think about how to draw attention to your message...and I have the chutzpah to fight for the truth.

Once, I smuggled a big rock into the Security Council to demonstrate that rock-throwing is terrorism, even if they refuse to verify and report that fact. The president of the Security Council was [from] Norway and he claimed I endangered them because, as I had told them, the rock was a weapon. I told them it's a weapon if you throw it at a moving car.

So, I learned my lesson. When I lit a memorial candle in the Security Council, I used an electric one and didn't try to light a fire.

LH: *How much does the U.N. General Assembly really matter for Israel?*

GE: It's a question that I am often asked by Jews in the U.S. I tell them about what [first Israeli Prime Minister David] Ben-

Gurion said...that the Jewish state was not established because of the United Nations, but because of courageous Jews. "It does not matter what the [non-Jews] say; it matters what the Jews do." When it comes to protecting the lives of Israelis, we should only care about Israel.

At the same time, today our enemies don't think they can defeat us on the conventional battlefield, so their weapon is to delegitimize our existence. They call us an apartheid state and try to convince young decision-makers that Israel is the biggest human rights violator in the world and should be a pariah...They pressure Ben & Jerry's and others to boycott Israel, they go after us in the International Criminal Court, and their claims ignite antisemitic attacks, because [the attackers] don't differentiate between Israelis and Jews.

It's extremely important to be present here, to expose the lies, the hypocrisy, and the double standards. That's how I go on the offensive.

It's also important to showcase Israel's achievements. I organized two very important meetings for Netanyahu. He met with seven presidents of Pacific island countries and five presidents from the Caribbean. They each have the same vote as anyone else here. They all want to gain from our tech solutions, mainly in water, food security, some asked for healthcare and cyber defense. I told them, I separate the two things, but I always present them with a traffic light [chart] of how they vote regarding Israel. Micronesia is number 1 – they [are] 100% with Israel. Hungary does too. We took 40-50 important [U.N.] votes to build this scale.

We try to brand Israel as the solution, not the problem. When we hold these meetings, we say it's separate — morally we want to share our expertise because we cherish human rights. At the same time, they should understand that Israelis also face challenges...I ask them not to play politics with us. These are the tactics that I use here.

LH: *Have they been effective?*

GE: I have been working for the last three years, and it is still an uphill battle, but every year we succeed in further eroding the anti-Israeli majority. We're still losing when

the Palestinians present their package [of resolutions], but historically they had 140-150 with them, and this year they got only 87 votes when they presented the resolution to investigate Israel in the International Court of Justice. Many countries now prefer to just disappear during the vote, which is fine — baby steps. I think our position here is getting stronger every year. If we're patient and understand we need [to] fight to achieve long term goals, exactly like how the Abraham Accords were achieved, we will also shatter the anti-Israel majority. It's a matter of time.

LH: *The U.S. is the only permanent member of the U.N. Security Council whose leader attended the General Assembly this week. Is that a sign of the U.N.'s diminishing influence? If so, is that good for Israel?*

GE: I think there are different reasons why each one didn't send their president. You can't generalize. I do agree that today, not only because of the competition between the U.S. and China, we also have the war in Ukraine — the U.N. has gone almost back to the Cold War, where you look to see which country is on the side of the U.S., or is with Russia or afraid of Russia. The Security Council is almost paralyzed when it comes to conflicts. If one of the two sides has an interest, the other will make sure nothing effective can come out of it...When it comes to preventing war and solving conflicts the U.N. definitely lost [its ability], especially now.

But it's still the biggest international organization, so we cannot ignore it. We have to fight for ourselves here.

LH: *Israel appears close to joining the U.S. Visa Waiver Program, an effort that you initiated when you were ambassador to the U.S. What was your role? Where do you think that is going?*

GE: I knew Alejandro Mayorkas when he was deputy secretary of homeland security, and I was [Israel's] public security minister, and we discussed the idea [in 2017]. Then he became secretary of homeland security soon after I became ambassador, so we started working on it.

I looked into the obstacles to joining the program and I realized that the American officials don't understand that Israelis who are 21-22 years old didn't graduate from university yet, so they don't have jobs, which is different from other countries. That's why our refusal rate was too high. So many soldiers right after their IDF service were refused visas. I convinced him to review their policy and the instructions.

I established a joint team with Mayorkas. I met with the State Department and [U.S. Special Representative for the Palestinians] Hady Amr at the time. He told me that without solving the issue of Palestinian-Americans, it'll never happen. So I spoke

with the head of the Shin Bet at the time, Nadav Argaman and he told me if the Shin Bet is the last obstacle, he guarantees he will find solutions.

Then I did one more thing, which I think was the most crucial. When Naftali Bennett became prime minister and came to meet President [Joe] Biden, I convinced his team to ask Biden to say Israel will be added to the Visa Waiver Program. Bennett accepted the idea and he raised it with the president. What I understood, as an experienced politician, was the difference between something getting stuck in the bureaucracy and a presidential commitment.

Sept 30 is my birthday, and with God's

help, this is the date the Americans are expected to announce whether we met the criteria. I think it will be a big achievement.

LH: You were ranked in the top three of the Likud list in five primaries. Are you making plans for your political comeback?

GE: I still have one more year at the U.N., and I still don't know. In Israel, a year is like five years in any other country. I want to continue contributing my experience and strengthening Israel, but I think it's too early to know. ♦

SEPTEMBER 28, 2023

Congress examines paths for ending Palestinian Authority's 'pay for slay'

A panel of expert witnesses testified on ways to address the PA's support for terrorists, with a Palestinian social safety net proposal appearing to be a consensus approach

By Marc Rod

A House subcommittee considered proposals on Wednesday to address and end the Palestinian Authority's payments to the families of terrorists, known as the "pay for slay" program.

In response to these "martyr payments," the U.S. implemented the Taylor Force Act, which bars direct U.S. assistance to the PA as long as the payments continue. Among a panel of three expert witnesses before the House Foreign Affairs Committee's Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia subcommittee, a proposal to implement a more broad needs-based social welfare program to replace the terror payments appeared to have consensus support.

"Israelis and others who are very familiar with this dynamic, they suggest the implementation of a social security program that would begin to provide a

safety net for all destitute Palestinian people who are in need, and cut [pay for slay] entirely," Jonathan Schanzer, the senior vice president for research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said. "You could have people who are in jail, or the families of those who are in jail, receiving the same amounts as any other family in the West Bank. That would, I think, be an equalizer, if you will."

Schanzer said that Israel supports such a proposal, and that the administration could press Saudi Arabia to help fund it, regardless of the outcome of the current normalization talks.

Elliott Abrams, a deputy national security advisor under President George W. Bush who earlier this year was nominated by President Joe Biden to serve on the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy,

argued that pay for slay sends the message to the Palestinian people that "terrorists should be honored and rewarded."

"It would be reasonable, I think, for the PA to say, for example, that, 'Whatever the crime was committed, the criminal's family, children should not suffer,'" Abrams said. "They could have implemented a welfare-based system, a system of family allowances based on the number of children — one example. And they have steadfastly refused to do that, precisely because such a system would no longer honor and reward terrorists based on the seriousness of their crimes."

Michael Koplow, the chief policy officer at the Israel Policy Forum, said that "the burden must be on Palestinian leadership to demonstrate compliance" with the Taylor Force Act, including potentially "moving to a needs-based system."

In addition to the safety net proposal, Schanzer laid out a multipart plan for addressing West Bank terrorism, including amending the Taylor Force Act to ban payments indirectly benefiting the Palestinian Authority; ending support to the U.N. Relief and Works Agency; increasing support for the U.S. security coordinator for Israel and the Palestinians; strengthening military cooperation between Israel and Jordan; enforcing bounty payments for top Hamas leader Saleh al-Arouri; passing legislation cracking down on international support for Hamas; and ending sanctions relief to Iran.

Koplow seconded Schanzer's call for increased support for the security coordinator and said the U.S. should also urge Israel to limit settlement growth and dismantle West Bank outposts that are illegal under Israeli law.

He added that the U.S. should leverage the Abraham Accords to "incentivize the PA to institute necessary reforms" and "includ[e] Palestinians in the normalization process," both to protect the agreements from the region's chronic instability and "incentivize Palestinians to embrace a diplomatic process."

Abrams said that the U.S. must place more pressure on other international partners to stop payments to the Palestinian Authority — something that is required under the Taylor Force Act but Abrams believes the administration has not been doing.

Lawmakers and some members of the panel accused the administration of looking for ways to circumvent the Taylor Force Act, including in ongoing talks with Saudi Arabia. The administration has reportedly pushed Saudi Arabia to resume payments to the PA as part of those talks.

"They've actually been encouraging other countries to raise payments to the PA. It's absurd," Rep. Mike Lawler (R-NY) said. "This is just another example of the Biden administration neglecting the Taylor Force Act, and instead choosing to bolster the credibility of the antisemitic, anti-Israel and pro-terror PA."

But Lawler and the witnesses said that Saudi Arabia could be a productive partner in other ways, whether through using Saudi leverage over the Palestinian Authority to

pressure it to enact reforms or by directly funding an assistance mechanism for the Palestinian people separate from the PA.

Schanzer also said the State Department's Palestinian affairs office and coordinator appear to be "day to day... looking for creative workarounds to the Taylor Force Act and its enforcement," and said that the office should potentially be terminated.

Abrams, responding to new reporting that the administration had provided funding to a group linked to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, argued that the government needs stricter procedures for vetting aid recipients, claiming that they are not subjected to basic internet searches.

Schanzer added that existing procedures are generally effective for rooting out Hamas, PIJ and Hezbollah affiliates, but that the PFLP and its affiliates are often "overlooked." He said that an investigation into PFLP and other smaller terror groups would "help tighten the noose a little bit on the way that this funding flows."

The hearing also addressed looming questions about the political future of the West Bank and the PA. The 87-year-old PA president, Mahmoud Abbas, has not articulated any clear succession plan. The panelists agreed that maintaining PA control would be preferable for both the U.S. and Israel.

"We are on the precipice of full collapse in not a lot of time," Schanzer said. "The way to head this off is to force Abbas to clarify the succession process or potentially even have him stand aside."

He warned that the longer these questions remain active, the more difficult it will be to restabilize the situation and the less likely potential successors to Abbas will be to want to step in.

"If the PA collapses, the two most likely scenarios, in my estimation, are a full Hamas takeover of the West Bank... [or] Israel goes in and reestablishes its presence in large Palestinian cities as was the case before the establishment of the Palestinian Authority," Koplow said, "which is an outcome that I know the Israelis would like to avoid at nearly any cost."

Koplow added that the "leadership and institutional vacuum" in the West Bank is fueling terrorism, violence and instability,

highlighting the need to "hold them to account" through methods like the Taylor Force Act as well as use other tools to "support the Palestinian institutions and the Palestinian people working for positive change."

Rep. Brian Mast (R-FL), a longtime critic of the two-state solution, pressed the witnesses on the rising popularity of Hamas within the West Bank, declaring that he believes a two-state solution "is dead" and "never made sense."

"We should be working to optimize the status quo," Mast said. "Because sometimes things just aren't going to get better."

Rep. Ronny Jackson (R-TX) argued that assistance to the Palestinians should be tied to the levels of violence in the West Bank, and decreased when levels of violence spike.

The brother of Elan Ganeles, an American citizen killed by a terrorist in the West Bank earlier this year, attended the hearing. ♦

Bringing Holocaust education into the Metaverse

‘Tell Me, Inge...’ is an innovative step for Holocaust education, allowing users to hear firsthand accounts from the war for years to come

By **Tori Bergel**

With the myriad challenges facing Holocaust education these days, the most pressing, and seemingly unavoidable, is time. All too quickly, the world is being forced to accept a difficult truth: that soon there will be no survivors left to share their stories.

In an effort to combat this grim reality, and to propel Holocaust education into the future, Meta and StoryFile, in partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO,) the World Jewish Congress and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, celebrated the international launch of “Tell Me, Inge...,” a new virtual reality and extended reality experience through one survivor’s life during World War II, on Wednesday evening at Ivy Terrace in Midtown Manhattan.

“I think Meta deserves a lot of credit for taking this seriously,” Ambassador Deborah Lipstadt, the U.S. special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism, who was in attendance at Wednesday’s event, told Jewish Insider. “It would be wonderful if all online platforms lived up to the standards they set for themselves.”

“Tell Me, Inge...” shares the story of chemist and noted Holocaust writer Inge Auerbacher, who survived the Theresienstadt Ghetto as a child. Auerbacher, who was born in Germany, but has lived in the U.S. since 1946, was in attendance at the launch event and participated in a conversation with Meta’s president of global affairs, Nick Clegg, which was moderated by StoryFile CEO and co-founder Stephen Smith.

“I do not want to leave this earth just as somebody in a coffin,” Auerbacher said of her decision to continue sharing her story.

“I want my life to have meant something, especially for all the murdered Jewish children.”

Recorded over two days, “Tell Me, Inge...” presents itself as an intimate conversation between the listener and Auerbacher, but on a new stage: the Metaverse. Inside Meta’s virtual world, the user is presented with a seated Auerbacher, alone apart from her red memory box and the wooden end table it sits atop.

Users have the option of interacting with Auerbacher by asking her questions directly or by clicking on a series of prompts digitally projected across the screen, after which Auerbacher can be heard narrating her story as hand-drawn animations give a visual depiction of the scenes as she describes them.

“The use of new kinds of media will speak to a segment of the population in a way that they’re used to being spoken to,” Lipstadt told JI. “Some people will like it, some people will not like it, but you got to start where the client is at, and there are a lot of young people who we hope will respond to this, so I’m glad to see it happening.”

Despite the advancement of the technology as it stands, Clegg sees “Tell Me, Inge...” as a “pioneering” project. It may take a while, he said during the conversation, for Meta’s virtual reality technology to be as accessible and lightweight as it could be, but “Tell Me, Inge...” will always be viewed as a leader in immersive education and personal virtual experiences.

As an accompaniment to the project, the Claims Conference created a written educational guide for use by young adults to help grow Holocaust education in the classroom. Also in attendance on Wednesday night were World Jewish Congress President

Ronald Lauder, UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay, White House Jewish liaison Shelley Greenspan and Claims Conference President Gideon Taylor.

“Where does hatred begin? At a young age. You learn it from your friends, you learn it from your parents, friends, etc... and that’s where the Holocaust really began,” Auerbacher said. ♦

Drone air-taxis conduct test flights over Jerusalem

Cando Drones expects to offer service to Tel Aviv in 2025 as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Singapore make plans to fill the skies with air taxis

By Linda Gradstein

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

Perched on seven whirring propellers, the sleek black-and-white cockpit lifted vertically toward the sky and circled above the hills and valleys of the pine-filled Jerusalem Forest.

Two years from now, the remote-controlled aircraft could be ferrying passengers to Tel Aviv, Ben Gurion International Airport and suburbs teeming with tech startups as drone-taxi service is introduced to Israel. Among the objectives is to whisk travelers above the traffic jams that snarl Israel's highways, and ultimately cut down the number of vehicles on the road.

In a combined effort by industry, government and regulatory authorities, Israel is conducting test flights to determine how it can safely unleash fleets of drones with fare-paying passengers into its Mediterranean skies. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Singapore are among a number of ambitious nations vying to be first with a pilotless air-taxi system operating at a competitive cost.

"We have built a concept of operation to reduce traffic around the world," Yoely Or, CEO of Cando Drones, said during a recent demonstration for reporters of the aircraft's capabilities on the grounds of Jerusalem's Hadassah-Ein Kerem Hospital. Or said he expects the drone taxis to operate commercially by 2025 with more than 100 aircraft making short hops between Israeli metropolitan areas.

At the hospital, the helicopter-like EVTOL drone – electric vertical takeoff and landing – sat on a helipad waiting for its test flight. Inside are two comfortable-looking seats for passengers, although not much

room for cargo. A drone pilot operates the aircraft sitting in a screen-filled command-and-control room in an office building miles away. As it took off, the drone's lights turned green and it lifted silently to an altitude barely visible to a naked eye. After a 15-minute flight, it descended directly onto the helipad.

The taxi demonstration was part of Israel's National Drone Initiative, which is holding flight tests and demonstrations in locations around Israel. The initiative is a partnership between government entities led by the Transportation Ministry, the Israel Innovation Authority, Ayalon Highways Ltd., and the Civil Aviation Authority of Israel (CAAI). The goal of the initiative is to support and promote drone flight through technology, regulation and infrastructure.

"What we're looking at here is how... to move beyond transporting packages to transporting human beings," said Daniella Partem, a senior director of the Innovation Authority. "We are looking to improve the economic viability of this model and advance connectivity in urban areas and further afield around the world."

Partem said the drone taxis would also be made available for use in emergencies like earthquakes to bring relief workers and medicine to an affected area. But CEO Or sees the commercial possibilities, saying the drones will be just like ground taxis but much faster.

While saying fares for the air taxi service would be moderate, neither Or nor Partem would put a price on the rides. "There are no prices yet because the flights are still experimental," the Innovation Authority said in response to questions. "The operating expenses are not yet based on

regular activity."

Each drone, manufactured by Guangzhou, China-based EHANG Intelligent Technology, can carry up to 220 kilograms (485 pounds) and fly 30 kilometers (19 miles), according to Or, who said they expect to increase the range within the next two years to make the 70-kilometer (43-mile) trip to Tel Aviv. The aircraft costs about \$500,000 apiece, including import charges to Israel, and the company currently has two drones in testing. The company has raised \$25 million from investors, including Israeli supermarket chain owner Rami Levy, who plans to use drones for grocery deliveries.

"Our vision for joint operations with Cando Drones is to create a system for operating an autonomous drone fleet for the purposes of security and delivery, from the stage of customer order up to delivery and mission completion," Levy said.

Cando Drones, whose Dronery subsidiary runs the air taxi project, is not the only company in Israel developing air taxis. In June, Air One tested a similar all-electric two-seater drone taxi that can fly up to 160 kilometers (99 miles). Like Cando, Air One plans to operate a fleet of air taxis.

In the command-and-control center on the 17th floor of an office tower at Jerusalem's Malha Technology Park, representatives from all of the parties in the initiative sat around a large table, surrounded by screens that show drone flights in real time.

"The challenge is not delivering food or medicine from point A to point B. The challenge is to make the skies over the city safe," Libby Bahat, the head of aerial infrastructure at the Israeli Civil Aviation Authority, said. "Free-market competition

will make the prices reasonable, but the challenge is to make the skies as safe as possible.”

Israel faces some significant security issues in drone aviation. Large swaths of the country along the borders with Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Syria are off-limits, as well as the sky over the Old City of Jerusalem.

“There are a few challenges to widespread operations of civilian drones,” Eyal Pinko, an expert in intelligence, cyberwarfare and national security at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan, Israel, told *The Circuit*. “First is the cybersecurity issue and how to protect the drones from being hacked. Iran is trying to hack anything it

can – water, electricity and transportation. Second is how to recognize the drone and see that it is not meant for terror activities. Thirdly is a question of real estate. Israeli streets have a lot of houses and electricity cables and in the populated cities, not much empty space.”

Pinko said that the three most advanced countries in civilian drone technology are Singapore, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In Dubai, there is already a plan for air taxi stations and UAE Prime Minister Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, said the company will work with Santa Cruz, Calif.-based Joby Aviation.

In Singapore, where Pinko said regulatory structure is most advanced, a

fleet of air taxis is set to start operating by the end of this year. Abu Dhabi-based Edge Group, a government-owned arms maker and defense conglomerate invested \$14 million earlier this year in Israel’s High Lander Aviation, a platform that enables drone operations by managing traffic, aerial security, public safety and drone delivery networks.

“We see it as a strong strategic investment,” High Lander CEO Alon Abelson told *The Circuit*. “We had an option to work with VCs in Israel, but we see the Gulf and what is happening there as a clear target to lead the ecosystem in aviation.” ♦