

THE WEEKLY PRINT

The Obama Mideast expert guiding VP Harris on foreign policy; Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari: From theater kid to Navy SEAL to the IDF's iconic wartime spokesman; Israel remains committed to a long-term timetable to take out Hamas despite growing U.S. impatience; Jewish communal leaders still committed to DEI framework, despite widespread criticism; Harvard controversy casts spotlight on Penny Pritzker, former Obama official atop university board; Jewish music fans question artists' silence after Oct. 7; Mazi Melesa Pilip discusses her policy platform in pivotal special election; Tom Suozzi argues he'll be a Democratic bulwark against the hard left in Congress; For one acclaimed Egyptian author and activist, speaking out against Hamas has come with a price; U.S. visa ban on extremist settlers causes confusion; Meta grapples with regulating violent content in Israel-Hamas war; and Pro-Israel advocates push the White House to redesignate the Houthis as terrorists, but say it's also not enough.

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The Obama Mideast expert guiding VP Harris on foreign policy

Phil Gordon has carved out an unusually influential role as national security advisor to the VP

By Gabby Deutch

In every presidential administration, vice presidents face an uphill battle to prove their relevance and impact policymaking. Vice President Kamala Harris is no different.

As the Israel-Hamas war drags on, Harris has begun to play a more active role in conversations about the war and its aftermath in Gaza. She's offered tougher words for Israel than President Joe Biden, and *Politico* reported that she wants senior White House leaders to express more sympathy for civilians in Gaza.

At the center of Harris' circle of foreign policy advisors is Philip Gordon, her

national security advisor. Gordon previously served as former President Barack Obama's top Middle East advisor in his second term, when Gordon emerged as one of the biggest boosters of the Iran nuclear deal.

His position advising the vice president might seem relatively inconsequential. But both of the top foreign policy officials in the Biden administration — National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Secretary of State Tony Blinken — previously held the same job as Gordon when Biden was vice president. To the extent that Harris has a future role to play in the Democratic Party, Gordon will likely remain an important

player, and a window into where Democrats might be moving on foreign policy.

It was a shrewd decision by Gordon, who first entered the Biden-Harris administration as Harris' deputy national security advisor, working under a woman who had once worked under him at the State Department. He was promoted last year.

"Many people remarked, when he got that deputy position, that it was kind of a step down for him. I did ask him about it," said Jeremy Shapiro, research director of the European Council on Foreign Relations. "It's a common view amongst people who've been in these high reaches of government

that the important thing is to be in the room. It's a little bit less important what your position is."

The bet has paid off for Gordon, who is often seated besides Harris when she is meeting with foreign leaders. "I believe that [Vice President] Harris depends heavily on Phil's advice given his deep experience and knowledge of all the players," said Martin Indyk, a former U.S. ambassador to Israel who served as the U.S. envoy to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process from 2013 to 2014.

Earlier this month, Gordon took an unusually high-profile trip to Israel and the West Bank to meet with senior Israeli and Palestinian officials, including Israeli President Isaac Herzog and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. It was part of an all-hands-on-deck diplomatic effort that has seen senior American leaders ranging from Biden to Blinken to CIA Director William Burns, as well as scores of lower-level officials, travel to the region since the Oct. 7 terror attacks in Israel.

"I would think they're promoting him because he's effective as a messenger for the president's policies," said Robert Blackwill, a former U.S. ambassador to India who has worked under Republican presidents. A White House official called Gordon "a trusted advisor to the vice president and a valued member of the president's overall national security team."

Gordon is well known by Israeli officials, and in 2016 he authored a bipartisan report with Blackwill about repairing the U.S.-Israel relationship after years of what he described as "serious differences [between the U.S. and Israel] on a long list of policy issues."

"I have known Phil for years and have always enjoyed working with him," Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Michael Herzog told *Jewish Insider*. "I have high regard for his professionalism and integrity."

Gordon, who did not respond to an interview request, started his career as a Europe expert, advising then-President Bill Clinton on European affairs toward the end of his second term. That's how he initially joined the Obama administration: as assistant secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, before moving to Obama's National Security Council staff. After stepping down from his position in 2015, he became one of the strongest public

advocates for the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

"I think he's very much on the progressive wing of the national security continuum," said Foundation for Defense of Democracies CEO Mark Dubowitz, who participated in several public debates on the Iran deal with Gordon in 2015. "He's Obama redux."

Biden has taken a different tack toward Israel than Obama, who was more willing to publicly criticize Israel. The Biden administration, meanwhile, has tried to handle major policy disputes in private. Biden often calls himself a Zionist and more firmly places himself in the pro-Israel camp, and traveled to Israel a week and a half after Hamas' Oct. 7 attack.

"This was the president's gut from the beginning, saying, 'I'm with Israel, this is a historic moment, and I'm all in,'" said Robert Danin, a former career State Department official who worked in Jerusalem during the Obama administration. "When the president is so out front on an issue like this, everyone just falls into line."

White House officials deny that there is any difference in the way that Biden and Harris are approaching the conflict in Gaza.

"There is absolutely no divergence in worldviews," the White House official told *JI* on Thursday. "The president and vice president have very clearly laid out our policy priorities repeatedly, and every member of our administration is executing these policies every day: Israel has a right to defend itself, Hamas cannot control Gaza, humanitarian aid must be provided, civilians must be protected and we must provide a hopeful political horizon for the Palestinian people."

But even some people close to the Biden administration acknowledge a difference in tone between Harris and Biden. Harris is generally believed to be more receptive to the demands of the political left, including on this issue.

"[Biden's] commitment to stand by Israel is deeply unpopular among some in the Democratic Party," Indyk said. "At his side during critical moments, [Harris] is in a position to provide reliable advice on the political dimensions of his decisions. She has also played an important role in publicly signaling Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu when the president feels his message is not

getting through."

One Middle East policy expert working in Washington, who asked not to be named because he has worked with Gordon in the past, said that "there was bound to be political signaling on this" because "what's happening in Gaza is truly, truly horrifying." But, the expert added, "it seems to me that this is rhetorical," noting that Biden continues to pledge his support for Israel and lobby for Congress to pass a supplemental spending package with billions of dollars of security assistance for Israel.

If there is a difference on the politics of Israel, "that's the difference between Obama and Biden. Biden is very, very different from Obama," said Natan Sachs, director of the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. That's the camp Gordon came from — but it's also where Sullivan, who served as director of policy planning in the Obama State Department, worked.

But where Sullivan and Blinken threw their lot in with Biden's campaign early in the 2020 primary cycle, Gordon chose to support Harris in her primary bid, for which he served as a foreign policy advisor.

"I think Phil was smart and probably saw that Harris was going to potentially become president," Dubowitz said. "That could potentially be a very savvy call."

At the end of the day, Gordon's a policy wonk, with a PhD and nearly a dozen books that he's written or edited under his belt. But that doesn't mean his ambitions end there.

"From what I know, he isn't some D.C. Machiavellian trying to game the system kind of person," said Sachs. "If you're national security advisor to the vice president, then you're very successful at the D.C. game. But some people can play the D.C. game in an honorable way, and many people have done it in other ways. I really do think he's in the former camp." ♦

Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari: From theater kid to Navy SEAL to the IDF's iconic wartime spokesman

The IDF spokesman's daily press briefing has become popular viewing in Israel, and his willingness to engage directly with the international media stands out from his predecessors

By Lahav Harkov

In the chaotic months since Hamas' massacre and the ensuing war, there has been one mainstay for Israelis: IDF Spokesman Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari, standing in front of two Israeli flags and speaking to the nation.

Each evening, Hagari recounts the day's events in plain language, bowing his head in memory of soldiers killed in battle and describing ground operations deep inside Gaza and airstrikes against Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. Then, he takes questions from reporters.

Hagari's nightly press briefings, which began on Oct. 7, have made him a wartime star in Israel in a way that no IDF spokesperson has been in many years.

Israel's public broadcaster Kan shared a video by a comedian about how "everyone loves Daniel Hagari: Left, right, Mizrahi, Ashkenazi, secular, religious – and even men. No one is in the consensus as much as Daniel Hagari." Israeli singer-songwriter Aya Korem rewrote her popular song "Yonatan Shapira" to be about the IDF spokesman, who, she sang, caused a "humanitarian crisis in my heart."

A popular meme being sent around on WhatsApp in recent weeks reads: "Why are women attracted to Daniel Hagari, you ask? Because he is the only man who bothers to update them every day, at the same hour, [with] what he did that day, what he plans to do tomorrow and at the end, he answers their questions."

Former Diaspora Affairs Minister Nachman Shai was perhaps the most iconic spokesperson in the IDF's history, earning the nickname "the national soother" amid the threat of chemical attacks from Iraq during the Gulf War, and calming Israelis with his catchphrase: "Drink water."

Shai told *Jewish Insider* he gives Hagari a top grade.

"He broadcasts honesty, purposefulness and practicality," Shai said. "He isn't talking nonsense and isn't trying to flatter anyone. He's just presenting the true picture within the existing limitations."

"So many people lie and tell half-truths, but Hagari looks like someone you can trust. He tells you the situation in five minutes. Sometimes he says something patriotic, but not often. He isn't populist or calling for revenge," Shai said.

Shai said that Israelis have a lack of trust in politicians in general, pointing to polls showing a sharp decline in support for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Hagari, Shai said, "represents something else. That is his advantage. He wasn't a media figure before, like some past spokespeople were. The public sees that; the public sees his spirit and they like it."

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Hagari, 47, known to his friends as Danny, is a married father of four, the youngest of whom is one year old. He grew up in Tel Aviv as the eldest of three siblings. His brother Ben is an acclaimed video artist based in New York. His other brother, Yoni, lives in the rehabilitation village ADI Negev-Nahalat Eran for people with physical and mental disabilities, which the IDF spokesman visited during the war.

There has been much made in Israeli media of the fact that Hagari majored in theater (as well as biology) in high school and starred in school plays as a teen, leading commentators to speculate that his experience made him a natural at the spokesman job. He also spent many hours

as a child behind the scenes at the famed Cameri Theater in Tel Aviv, where his mother ran the subscription office.

Hagari enlisted in the IDF in 1995 and climbed the ranks of Shayetet 13, the equivalent of the Navy SEALs, becoming its commander in 2019.

Before leading the *Shayetet*, Hagari served as a top aide to IDF Chiefs of staff Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, both currently members of the war cabinet. The position put him at the intersection of government and military and gave him a broad view of the IDF's operations, its ties with Israel's other security arms and its international and public relations.

IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevy handpicked Hagari to be the spokesman, a job he officially began in March.

With his current success and popularity as spokesman, there has been recent chatter in the IDF that Hagari may be promoted to the rank of major general, possibly as the head of the IDF Personnel Directorate, a job that, in recent years, some have parlayed into a political career.

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Hagari's experience as a combat soldier on the ground contributes to his ability to effectively relay the IDF's messages, said former *Jerusalem Post* Editor-in-Chief Yaakov Katz, a senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute and a frequent critic of the IDF's media efforts.

Hagari is "not just a talking head; he's a rear admiral and the former commander of the *shayetet*," Katz said. "It gives him gravitas that other people don't have, and that makes a difference."

Lt. Col. Richard Hecht, the IDF's

international spokesman, praised his blue-eyed commanding officer's "authentic, Ari Ben-Canaan style," a reference to Paul Newman's character in the film "Exodus."

"It's an advantage that he's a [born] Israeli and not a polished native English speaker," Hecht said.

Shai said he prefers Hagari's *sabra* accent to other officers in his unit who come from the English-speaking world.

"It bothers me that all of our official spokespeople have American or British accents," he said. "You rarely see a spokesperson with an Israeli accent... [Hagari] speaks English well, with simple, clear language."

The fact that Hagari speaks English in public at all — and even holds press briefings in English — is a rarity among IDF spokesmen in recent years.

Katz said Hagari is "the first in over 20 years to speak English directly to the international media and the international community."

"You can't underestimate the importance of having a seasoned officer with a senior rank of rear admiral talking to the media in English and taking reporters into the Gaza Strip, like he did on several occasions, showing them underground tunnels [used by Hamas]. This has significant impact on public opinion around the world," Katz said.

Shai agreed that "it's important for the IDF spokesperson to have the ability to communicate with journalists in English."

Hagari himself has emphasized the need for the IDF to communicate well internationally.

The international department "used to be the misfits on the side," Hecht said, but Hagari "understands the importance of [English communications] and mobilizes it to deal with the international sphere."

A prominent example of how the IDF Spokesperson's Unit works differently under Hagari was the 47-minute video of atrocities committed by Hamas on Oct. 7. The initial screenings were organized by the IDF for foreign reporters in Israel. Israeli embassies and consulates around the world have since been permitted to show it to media figures, diplomats, lawmakers and other opinion leaders.

"It's horrific. It will never leave me, for life," Hecht said of the video.

Hagari was present for the first media screening, and spoke for close to 20 minutes to the roughly 200 assembled journalists before the footage was shown.

The IDF Spokesman's Unit has also embedded more journalists with the troops in this war, including visits to the tunnels and hospitals used by Hamas in Gaza.

Embedding journalists with the troops is not something that comes naturally to the IDF. During the Second Lebanon War, Transportation Minister Miri Regev, then the IDF's spokesperson, was sharply criticized — some say scapegoated — for allowing journalists to accompany the troops and giving them what many viewed at the time as too much access. Since then, the IDF has been more hesitant to allow journalists to embed.

Hecht said the IDF was "afraid of embeds" when he entered his role. He started working to bring a change before this war, making the case to Hagari for Fox News' Trey Yingst to go into the West Bank town of Tulkarem with the IDF. He needed to "teach the forces that the media is not the enemy and we can gain points this way."

Media watchers may have noticed that CNN's Nic Robertson, ABC News' Matt Gutman and others were let into the terror tunnels under Rantisi Hospital before the usual suspects — Hebrew-speaking military analysts such as Channel 12's Nir Dvori or Channel 13's Alon Ben David.

Hecht told JI that "bringing in journalists to see, without us putting it out in our name, has a lot of power," which is why he focused on "bringing in tier-one journalists."

Katz called the practice "a total break with decades of tradition in the IDF."

"Israeli reporters were not happy, but it was smart. It shows an understanding that the operation is dependent on international legitimacy, and if you don't have it, you're in trouble," Katz said. "They're showing a new sophistication."

The IDF's media strategy "has paid off and the overall legitimacy for the Shifa Hospital raid was undeniable," he added.

Katz also argued that the IDF Spokesman's Unit is working much quicker than in the past, citing the denial that Israel bombed the Al-Ahli Hospital in the early days of the war within hours of the explosion caused by Islamic Jihad as an example.

"They're getting the information out quickly and immediately, responding without shying away," Katz said. "It's a different approach and I think it's working." ♦

Israel remains committed to a long-term timetable to take out Hamas despite growing U.S. impatience

Israel's military achievements in Gaza are significant but many challenges remain and the most intensive battles may be yet to come

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Even as a stream of U.S. officials arrived this week to discuss with Israeli leaders the need to lower the intensity of fighting in the next phase of the war in Gaza, Israeli military experts believe the country needs more time to defeat Hamas — and that some of the most intense battles might be yet to come.

The IDF estimates that it has already eliminated more than 25 Hamas battalions in fighting so far and killed many of the organization's senior commanders, including Ahmed Al-Ghandoor, who directed the terror group's operations in Northern Gaza, and Rawhi Mushtaha, a political and strategic leader considered to be very close to Yahya Sinwar, Hamas' top leader in Gaza, according to information published by the IDF Spokesperson's unit.

In addition, Israel's current National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi said earlier this month that in total some 7,000 Hamas terrorists had been killed in the fighting, and although the army would not confirm that figure to *Jewish Insider*, it has reported almost daily on the killings, capture, or surrender of hundreds of terrorists, particularly in the last few weeks.

On Sunday, the IDF also revealed that it had uncovered a massive tunnel system spanning some 2.5 miles starting just a few feet from the Erez crossing, the checkpoint that prior to Oct. 7 had been used by hundreds of thousands of Gazans to reach medical treatment and work placements in Israel. The tunnel, which the army said was reinforced with concrete and equipped with electricity, ventilation, sewage, communication networks and rails, snaked below hospitals, schools, kindergartens and other sensitive sites.

Brig. Gen. (retired) Amir Avivi, CEO of the Israel Defense and Security Forum

(IDSF), told *JI* that one of the more enduring tasks now faced by the army is to dismantle this vast tunnel network, an effort that would likely employ a variety of methods, including flooding the shafts with seawater and bulldozing the structures or filling them in with cement.

"This process will take a very, very long time," said Avivi, noting that while the army was mostly in control of the northern part of Gaza, the area "was not completely clean" and much of the threat was coming from small groups of Hamas terrorists still hiding in tunnels.

Avivi, who previously headed the army's engineering corps and was responsible for the Gaza region, said the same process the IDF had employed in the north would now follow in Khan Younis, which is considered to be one of Hamas' strongholds in the south.

"It should take the army around two weeks to take full control of Khan Younis and then there will be two main areas left to deal with — the refugee camps of Deir al-Balah and Bureij in central Gaza and the southernmost city of Rafah," he said.

"It is a long process, and the army is doing it step by step," Avivi continued, adding that overall, "it could take another two or three months to fully dismantle the Hamas governmental and military capabilities."

But U.S. officials, including National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, the latter of whom was in Israel on Monday, are reportedly pressuring Israel to wrap up the main bulk of the fighting by early January and then move to a more low-intensity operation, including potentially withdrawing most IDF troops to the Gaza periphery.

Avivi said that such an idea was, "completely detached from reality on the

ground" — a sentiment echoed by others with whom *JI* spoke.

"If the expectation in the U.S. is that they will go into elections and things will be quiet then they do not understand that what is happening right now is not just about Gaza," Avivi said, noting that there is also the additional threats emanating from Iran's terror proxies, mostly Hezbollah, which sits on Israel's northern border, but also the Houthis in Yemen.

"Israel has to push forward, and the government is saying every day that it is going to destroy Hamas," Avivi emphasized. "Israel cannot destroy Hamas without taking over the camps, Rafah and the Philadelphi Route [along the border with Egypt]."

Brig. Gen. (Retired) Yaakov Nagel, Israel's former acting national security adviser and now a senior research fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, also said that Israel would not be rushed and not get distracted over post-war planning conversations unless the goals to eliminate Hamas' military, capture and even assassinate the Palestinian terror group's top leadership and to return alive the remaining 129 hostages are accomplished.

"Israel has three main objectives in this war and all three of them need to be fully fulfilled," Nagel said.

"Some of the missions contradict each other," Nagel admitted, referring mainly to the operation to save those kidnapped during Hamas' brutal Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel versus continuing to ramp up military pressure to destroy Hamas' military infrastructure and governing capabilities in the Strip and capture or kill its leaders.

On Friday, the IDF announced that three hostages who had managed to escape

from Hamas captivity were inadvertently killed by Israeli soldiers in the Gaza City neighborhood of Shejaiya, where fierce clashes with Hamas terrorists are still ongoing.

“Gaza is the biggest terror base in the world and from time to time there are operational accidents and casualties,” said Nagel.

Despite the tragic incident — and the ongoing battles in Shejaiya, as well as Jabaliya, a city just north of Gaza City — Nagel added that so far “the war against Hamas above ground is going almost the way that we planned it and we will probably finish the first phase sometime at the end of January or the beginning of February but then, we have a long way to go to destroy what is beneath Gaza.”

Nagel said the second phase, which Sullivan said last week should see a reduction in its intensity, could take up to two more years. That’s not taking into consideration other regional players who are also creating tension, such as the Iranian-backed militia Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, a terror proxy of Tehran.

Nagel also mentioned the need for Israel to secure the Egypt-Gaza border. Smuggling tunnels from Egypt into Gaza, he noted, were the conduit through which Hamas secured much of its massive weapons arsenal,

including long-range missiles capable of reaching Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, as well as the heavy machinery needed to construct Gaza’s vast advanced subterranean system.

Danny Orbach, a military historian at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, said that in every war success could only be measured within the framework of achieving the stated goals.

“Israel’s achievements so far are impressive from a professional point of view,” he said. “Hamas had a fighting force of around 30,000 and Israel has killed around 7,000 and injured many more.”

Orbach also noted that Hamas’ attacks in northern Gaza appeared to be less coordinated than they were ten weeks ago and that Israel now occupies most of the northern region, with the last vestige of Hamas’ defense being in Jabaliya and Shujaiya.

He explained that in Khan Younis, which is further south and is Hamas’ main center of gravity, the IDF’s upcoming battles there “will be hard and long.” Israel reached the city two weeks ago and is following a similar strategic pattern as in northern Gaza.

Orbach said that the military’s tactic was to start by encircling an area in order to isolate the fighters inside and then engage in raids of increasing intensity using special units that are eventually replaced by more

stationary regular military units.

“So far, this tactic is going quite well,” the military historian noted, adding that the army’s various branches — the navy, the air force and ground forces, as well as cyber and intelligence units — are well-coordinated, which has contributed so far to its military success.

Orbach told JI that “anyone who thinks that Israel will withdraw to the borders is out of touch with military reality.”

He said he believed the U.S. pressure was more an attempt at calming internal public opinion in America than at pressuring Israel because “there is no logical military way to destroy the Hamas regime without having real boots on the ground.”

“Bilateral relations are not based on dictates, they are based on conversation,” Orbach pointed out. “Especially in the Israel-U.S. relationship, they cannot ignore their partners and Israel has not ignored the requests of the U.S., to open the Kerem Shalom [humanitarian] crossing to allow more aid into Gaza, including fuel, even though it would have been better not to do so.”

Alternatively, he said, America will likely listen to Israel and not force it to “give up a core issue in this strategic war.” ♦

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Jewish communal leaders still committed to DEI framework, despite widespread criticism

ADL’s chief impact officer: ‘The responsibility to fix campuses is not narrowly on the DEI offices but is on the university president’

By Haley Cohen

The diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) bureaucracy at colleges has come under intense scrutiny in the wake of a House hearing on campus antisemitism, which underscored how programs designed to promote inclusion have failed to address the rising anti-Jewish hate on campuses — and often perpetuate it.

But even as there’s been an opportunity for Jewish leaders to confront the systemic challenges within the DEI system, leading Jewish communal organizations are still preferring to work within that system — urging universities to better incorporate Jews into an oppressor-oppressed hierarchy, instead of calling on them to dismantle the

ideology behind it altogether.

Leaders from the American Jewish Committee and Anti-Defamation League told JI their organizations are taking the engage-and-influence approach — and had been doing so well before Oct. 7.

“I wouldn’t use the word ‘confront’ to describe what we’re going to be doing,”

Sara Coodin, AJC's director of academic affairs, told JI. "We engage pretty regularly and partner with universities to work on education programs that can have the kinds of results we are looking for, more inclusion for Jewish students. We tend not to take an overly divisive approach when it comes to DEI." An example, Coodin said, is an AJC-run trip that brings DEI university staff to Israel.

"There are shortcomings in the lens that DEI has adopted to do its inclusion work," Coodin continued. "It's not a lens that was ever constructed with the Jewish community, our history, our needs in mind, so we are seeing now what those shortcomings yield. They yield a community unable to respond to the current moment and to antisemitism in a meaningful way."

"We hope we can create initiatives that actually work within DEI structures if those are the structures being used on campus, but at the same time we expect folks to be willing to acknowledge the situation we're in. There's nothing to be gained by papering over the situation we are in, that many Jewish students feel unsafe and unwelcome and are dealing with a toxic climate on campus," Coodin continued.

Adam Neufeld, senior vice president and chief impact officer at the ADL, echoed a similar approach. "We've been engaging universities, including DEI offices, for several years [about] the exclusion of antisemitism," he told JI. "Our goal is to ensure that campuses are free of antisemitism. We just care about the results and there are many ways of reaching that goal."

"We clearly have a massive problem with antisemitism on many college campuses and part of that is schools have not been communicating to their students the history of antisemitism and therefore have not baked that into their DEI programs," he continued.

Neufeld noted that "[the ADL's] view right now is that the responsibility to fix campuses is not narrowly on the DEI offices but is on the university president. The university presidents are the ones failing on so many campuses right now."

"The current crisis is a result of a lot of factors. We should not expect DEI to be the sole way we get out of this. This is a university president problem and part of it,

we think, is universities fixing their DEI to include antisemitism and Jews so that their student body understands antisemitism, he continued, adding that ADL is working with federal and state officials "to get universities to step up and reverse the dangerous situation they've created."

Neufeld said it was "reckless" for DEI programs not to speak about Jews and antisemitism.

"One of our core asks for all colleges is that DEI policies and trainings include antisemitism – both classic forms and more contemporary Israel forms of antisemitism," he said, noting that the ADL started collaborating with Hillel International and Chabad on Campus for this shift before Oct. 7. "And now it's only more clear that that's necessary."

"[DEI framework] can be applied in an antisemitic way but I think it can also be applied in a way that respects and brings light and makes people understand antisemitism," he added.

But David Bernstein, founder of the Jewish Institute for Liberal Values, told *Jewish Insider* that the problems within DEI programming are systemic, and that efforts to engage are a mistake.

"All that does is reinforce the ideological framework behind it and hampers our ability to oppose the constant source of antisemitism and illiberalism," Bernstein said, adding that "the underlying ideology of most DEI offices almost never [benefits] Jews, who they frame as oppressors."

Bernstein pointed to a *Tablet magazine* story by Armin Rosen, where the journalist interviewed equity offices at prominent colleges to see if they released statements of support for Jewish students after the Hamas massacre of Oct. 7. None of them did.

Bernstein called the congressional hearing earlier this month, in which Ivy League presidents refused to say that calling for the genocide of Jews constitutes harassment on campus, "a wake up call for a lot of people."

"The jury is out whether it will lead to a larger shift in Jewish attitude, but I do see some movement," he continued, noting that the issue has existed long before Oct. 7 and its subsequent rise of antisemitism. In 2021, a Heritage Foundation study analyzed the Twitter accounts of 741 DEI staff at 65

universities to compare their posts about Israel and China.

The data found them to be disproportionately focused on Israel relative to China, having posted about Israel almost three times more than about China – in an almost entirely negative way. Ninety-six percent of all of the Twitter communications were critical of Israel, while those about China were 62% positive.

"The question now is does the Jewish community try to engage DEI and influence the way it views Jews, does it try to oppose DEI, or does it try to transform DEI?" Bernstein continued.

Despite the ADL's stance that DEI programs need to be reformed to include Jews, the group's CEO Jonathan Greenblatt told JI earlier this month, "The failure of many of these DEI offices to effectively respond to the crisis right now is quite an indictment– it just is."

The ADL's Neufeld added that under extreme circumstances he would no longer be willing to work within the DEI system. "If a particular campus' DEI framework is so terrible that it perpetuates antisemitism and there is no sincere effort to change that approach, we would absolutely oppose DEI on that campus," he said. ♦

Harvard controversy casts spotlight on Penny Pritzker, former Obama official atop university board

Obama privately lobbied on Harvard President Claudine Gay's behalf as she faces growing scrutiny

By Matthew Kassel

Even as Harvard continues to stand behind its embattled president, Claudine Gay, amid mounting backlash over her handling of campus antisemitism and new accusations of plagiarism, Penny Pritzker, who helms the university's highest governing body, has so far remained conspicuously silent, drawing fresh scrutiny to her role atop the administration.

Pritzker, the billionaire Chicago hotel scion and former Obama administration official, was elected senior fellow of the Harvard Corporation last year, months after she had donated \$100 million to the university. In her new position, she personally led the search committee that named Gay as president last December, praising her in an announcement at the time as "a remarkable leader who is profoundly devoted to sustaining and enhancing Harvard's academic excellence."

Notwithstanding her initial enthusiasm, Pritzker has in recent weeks avoided personally defending the newly installed president, who has faced calls to resign, instead joining a statement signed by the 11 members of Harvard's top board, which has been criticized for a lack of transparency.

In their unanimous decision to back Gay last week, the board members affirmed their "confidence" in the university president, dismissing the plagiarism charges and accepting her apology for widely criticized comments at a congressional hearing on campus antisemitism earlier this month, where she equivocated on whether calls for the genocide of Jews would violate Harvard's code of conduct.

Before the Harvard Corporation had

released its statement, however, Pritzker had dodged repeated questions from a reporter for the school's student newspaper on whether she would ask the president to step down, even as Gay had claimed to have her support.

A spokesperson for Harvard said in an email to *Jewish Insider* on Thursday afternoon that she "is not available for an interview at this time and we have no further comment to provide." Pritzker did not respond to emails seeking comment.

Pritzker's limited public engagement has fueled skepticism of whether she performed due diligence in the vetting process that led to Gay's appointment, which detractors now see as flawed, citing a snowballing plagiarism scandal as well as top donors who have continued to join a growing revolt over the president's response to rising antisemitism amid the Israel-Hamas war.

"This is a full-blown corporate governance crisis for Harvard University and the fellows of the Harvard Corporation," Benjamin Badejo, an MBA candidate at Tel Aviv University who studied at Harvard Law School and is a vocal critic of Gay and Pritzker, said in a recent email to *JI*, "and raises questions about the fellows' ability to carry out their professional responsibilities."

Despite mounting pressure for Pritzker to address the controversy now embroiling Gay's brief tenure, close watchers of the administration allege that she has continued to keep a low profile because she has nearly as much at stake in the ongoing ordeal as the president she herself recruited. "What I hear is she has no intention of going down with the ship," one Harvard insider, speaking anonymously to discuss a sensitive topic,

said of Pritzker's motivations for remaining silent.

Behind the scenes, meanwhile, Pritzker, 64, had reportedly voiced misgivings over the university's delay in responding to Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks, which had fueled an outcry from leading donors who felt the university should firmly rebuke a letter signed by a coalition of student groups that blamed Israel for the massacre.

In a private phone call with the billionaire hedge fund manager Ken Griffin days after the attack, Pritzker expressed agreement with his demand that Harvard release a statement standing with Israel, according to an interview he gave to *The New York Times* two months ago. (A source familiar with the call told *JI* that the *Times* anecdote was "broadly accurate.")

The university's initial efforts to address the violence, however, were ultimately derided by donors, alumni and students who felt that Gay's statements had equivocated over the attacks.

To some observers, Pritzker's silence amid the fallout has been particularly glaring because she has long been regarded as a staunch supporter of Israel. The 64-year-old Jewish entrepreneur and philanthropist from Chicago, whose brother, J.B., is the governor of Illinois, was one of Barack Obama's earliest and most important financial backers, and has been credited with persuading Jewish and pro-Israel donors to support his first presidential campaign, despite skepticism over his approach to Middle East policy.

According to a source familiar with the matter, Obama, a Harvard graduate, had privately lobbied on Gay's behalf as

she faced pressure to resign in the wake of her disastrous appearance before the congressional hearing on antisemitism. “It sounded like people were being asked to close ranks to keep the broader administration stable — including its composition,” the source, who was informed of Obama’s outreach and asked to speak anonymously to discuss a confidential matter, told JI on Tuesday.

Obama’s office did not respond to a request for comment from JI.

It is unclear if Pritzker, who served as Obama’s commerce secretary in his second term, spoke with the former president as the Harvard Corporation was deliberating over its decision to support Gay.

The former Obama official has been outspoken against Jewish persecution, recalling her family’s escape from Russian pogroms to the United States, where the Pritzkers eventually created the Hyatt hotel chain. In September, she was appointed by President Joe Biden to serve as the U.S. special representative for Ukraine’s economic recovery.

But as Gay has come under scrutiny in recent months, Pritzker has found herself in an increasingly uncomfortable position, albeit one familiar to many Jews in positions of power, said Rabbi Hirschy Zarchi, the founder and president of Harvard Chabad, who has been publicly critical of Gay’s remarks to the House committee.

While Zarchi clarified that he had not spoken with Pritzker, he speculated that she has been cautious in recent weeks because of what he described as a preemptively defensive posture he has observed among other Jewish leaders at Harvard. “Jews in power go to an extreme degree to show that they’re neutral, lest they be accused of showing favoritism,” he told JI last week. “It’s another reflection of the toxic culture in the academy that people can’t speak their conscience.”

Still, critics see other calculations at play. In his email to JI, Badejo, the Harvard Law School alumnus, claimed that Pritzker and her fellow board members on the Harvard Corporation “arguably have conflicts of interest regarding Gay’s continued tenure as president, as managing the public’s awareness of their potential failures to do proper diligence” could potentially “impact

their own continued tenures.”

The Harvard Corporation has continued to back Gay, the school’s first Black president, even amid mounting accusations of plagiarism that have cast doubt on the integrity of her academic writings. The board on Wednesday acknowledged some indiscretions in Gay’s scholarship, but said the improper citations, for which she has requested corrections, fell short of research misconduct.

Meanwhile, in a letter to Pritzker on Wednesday, Rep. Virginia Foxx (R-NC), who chairs the House Education and Workforce Committee, said she was launching an investigation into Harvard’s handling of what she described as “credible allegations of plagiarism” against the university’s president.

Alan Solow, a former national co-chair of Obama’s reelection campaign, said he had not discussed the current controversy with Pritzker, whom he has known for years, but added that he had faith in her leadership at a particularly challenging moment.

“She is a person of great integrity. She is thoughtful; she studies, asks excellent and probing questions and listens,” Solow, the former chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said in a recent email to JI. “I hold her in the highest respect and have great confidence in her leadership and judgment based on my having worked on a variety of projects with her for more than 15 years.”

But a former high-profile fellow in the Harvard Institute of Politics, granted anonymity to speak candidly, questioned Pritzker’s decision to stand with Gay as misguided. “I wish I knew what motivated it because they will hemorrhage contributions,” the former fellow told JI. “She now needs to be fired and the board has to step down.”

On Thursday, Len Blavatnik, the billionaire investor whose family foundation has given at least \$270 million to Harvard, reportedly became the latest major donor to pause contributions to the university over dissatisfaction with Gay’s recent handling of antisemitism.

“If Harvard has already lost a billion dollars in donations because of her testimony, her plagiarism and her

unwillingness to truly back free speech,” the former fellow said, “the jury may still be out.” ♦

Jewish music fans question artists' silence after Oct. 7

Music industry insider: 'If you see October 7 and you don't say anything, you're never going to'

By Gabby Deutch

Anyone who's ever been on the internet knows where to find the most vile, toxic, avoid-it-at-all costs content: the comments section.

Influencers and celebrities who have posted online in support of Israel since Oct. 7 have seen their feeds blow up with antisemitic messages or "FREE PALESTINE" comments from dozens or hundreds of trolls. When the singer Pink posted a Hanukkah message earlier this month — not even mentioning Israel — one commenter called her post "really tone deaf in the currently [sic] climate."

That might explain why some musicians who support Israel have shied away from saying anything since the Hamas terror attacks that killed more than 1,200 people. But in this online era where ordinary people feel a deep connection to the artists they love, the silence is disappointing for many Jewish fans. They recognize the recent silence as a crushing letdown, likely to have lasting consequences: The events of Oct. 7 were so brutal that many of them thought celebrities who have spoken out on other social justice causes would feel compelled to recognize the atrocities.

"If you see October 7 and you don't say anything, you're never going to," one music industry insider told *Jewish Insider*.

Take the pop-rock band Haim, composed of three sisters whose father is an Israeli immigrant to Los Angeles. The Grammy-nominated sisters have leaned heavily on their Jewish identity since their debut album was released a decade ago, including playing shows at iconic Jewish delis in California and beyond. But the band's Instagram, with 1.5 million followers, has been silent since Oct. 7. So have each of the sisters' individual accounts. The comment sections on their

old posts, though, are full of the band's Jewish fans begging them to say something.

"Your silence is deafening," one user wrote on a year-old post showing Danielle Haim, the group's lead singer, holding a giant challah. "You don't get to pick and choose when to be Jewish and/or Israeli." *JI* did not receive a response to an inquiry sent to the band's management.

Since Oct. 7, social media users and music fans have picked apart their favorite artists' accounts to try to discern where they stand on the Israel-Hamas war. In an era when so many influencers use their public platforms to raise awareness of political causes, many fans told *JI* they expected to see the same after the Oct. 7 terror attacks and the corresponding global rise in antisemitism.

"To have prominent Jewish public figures remain silent on something of this scale — something that is so core to who they are — seems cowardly. It feels like a complete letdown," said Janna Berenson, a marketing executive in L.A. "I don't expect and am not asking for them to arrange a peace conference or to even rally the entertainment community. It would just be nice to know they care and that their morals are more important than their perception in the music industry."

Of course, these celebrities don't have any tangible impact on what's happening in the Middle East. But what they will or won't say about Israel is reflective of the broader cultural conversation. And among many of the trendiest young artists, public alignment with the Palestinians is perceived as the cooler position to take. (Some artists have vocally expressed their support for Israel and the Jewish community, perhaps none more so than the Soviet-born Jewish singer Regina Spektor.)

Public opinion polling since Oct. 7 shows that Gen Z Americans side more with the Palestinians than Israelis, and some are sympathetic to Hamas. They're more likely to take their cues from the celebrities they follow on social media, many of whom have millions of followers, than from politicians.

The biggest artist in the world right now is Taylor Swift. During the Trump presidency, she used her platform to speak publicly about politics for the first time. Legions of Swift's Jewish fans have spent the months since Oct. 7 imploring her to speak out about the terror attack, often highlighting the story of one of her fans who was killed in the attack.

"She could have used her position as the most famous human on the planet to do good and support Jews," said Emily Slavkin, a law student in New York City. "She's been silent."

Earlier this month, Swift attended a philanthropic event raising money for humanitarian relief in Gaza, but she still has not publicly spoken about the war. MUNA and Phoebe Bridgers, two of the up-and-coming acts who opened for her record-breaking world tour this year, signed onto a pro-cease-fire statement that accused Israel of apartheid and failed to mention Hamas and the Oct. 7 attacks.

"We shouldn't just focus on why didn't Jewish artists speak up. More importantly, where were the non-Jewish artists to be there for them, to be their allies? To tell them, 'We got your back if you do speak up, and we will stand next to you?'" asked Ari Ingel, executive director of Creative Community for Peace, an organization founded by entertainment industry executives to fight the cultural boycott of Israel. "That was totally absent, even though every other

persecuted and minority community gets that allyship.”

Creative Community for Peace has tracked a widespread harassment campaign targeting celebrities who mention Israel, which is apparent to anyone who glimpses at the comment sections of artists’ posts. When pop singer Billie Eilish released a new album in 2021, a marketing campaign from her record label had her film short videos to be released all over the world, urging international fans to buy her new album. “Hi, Israel,” she said in a brief video for MTV Israel. Thousands of pro-Palestine bots swarmed her Instagram account, even on posts having nothing to do with Israel. No other country-specific videos received similar backlash.

“I think the boycott movement has had their most success targeting young female

artists. I think the reason for that is because young female artists actually do look at their Instagram feeds and engage with them still,” Ingel said. “There’s a coordinated campaign to demonize Israel and delegitimize Israel out there, and to try to make speaking about Israel toxic.”

Do we expect too much from our favorite celebrities? Maybe. But that doesn’t make it easier for fans to handle their disappointment.

“Music is a huge part of my life, and I find it extremely challenging to sort through the attachment I feel to artists and their music, especially when juxtaposed by the sting of betrayal felt each time they throw around often antisemitic rhetoric,” said Orly Einhorn, a college graduate living in Cleveland.

New York magazine columnist Jonathan

Chait wrote last month that institutions such as universities and companies should simply stop making official statements about “issues outside their purview” to avoid the fallout seen since Oct. 7, when many have struggled to take a clear stand. The same could be said for artists. But the emotional bond that fans feel to their favorite bands, which has only grown more intense in the age of social media, means the lack of sympathy hurts in a particularly acute way.

“As a lifelong fan and especially now that Swiftie culture is sweeping the globe, we think of her as a friend, someone that we deeply care about,” Slavkin said of Taylor Swift. “Just like I’d expect my friend to reach out to me and express support, I expect that from her. And just as it hurt when my friends didn’t, it hurts when she’s silent as well.” ♦

DECEMBER 19, 2023

Mazi Melesa Pilip discusses her policy platform in pivotal special election

Pilip stakes out moderate ground on abortion and Donald Trump in first in-depth interview since entering the race

By Matthew Kassel

In the special election to replace recently expelled Rep. George Santos (R-NY), Republican leaders have pinned their hopes on Mazi Melesa Pilip, an Ethiopian-born Jewish county legislator and Israel Defense Forces veteran who is now preparing for a high-stakes battle against a formidable Democratic opponent.

Owing largely to her compelling biography, Pilip, 44, is widely viewed as a rising star among New York Republicans seeking another upset in a Long Island-based swing district that could help decide the balance of power in the House. But the political newcomer, picked as the GOP’s nominee last week following an extensive vetting process, has drawn criticism from Democrats for not taking positions on hot-button issues, raising questions about her political inexperience and offering fodder

for partisan attacks.

Speaking with *Jewish Insider* on Monday, however, Pilip was ready to clarify her views on a range of key topics, including abortion rights and the criminal charges against former President Donald Trump, while addressing her longtime party registration as a Democrat and past support for Santos, who was ousted from Congress a few weeks ago.

In her first in-depth interview with a news outlet since entering the race, Pilip, who launched her campaign on Friday, cast herself as a moderate Republican voice reflective of the swing voters in the district who backed President Joe Biden in 2020 but later voted for GOP candidates in last year’s midterms.

With regard to Trump, whom recent polling has shown is unpopular among most

voters in the district, Pilip refrained from defending the former president as he faces multiple indictments that have contributed to a surge in GOP support. “Trump has to go through his process,” she argued. “Nobody’s above the law.”

Still, Pilip vowed to stand behind the nominee no matter which candidate ultimately prevails. “Trump is one of the candidates,” she reasoned. “The debate is ongoing. We have great candidates right now. We have to wait and see, and once we know who is the Republican nominee, we’re going to support that person.”

While Pilip had dodged a question from a reporter asking for her position on a national abortion ban last week, the Nassau County legislator — who has focused largely on defending Israel and supporting the police during her time in office — expressed

no hesitation in explicitly opposing the prohibition in the interview on Monday, amid mounting criticism from Democratic groups over her initial response.

"Abortion is a very personal decision, OK?," Pilip told JI. "Now, I am a religious person, I have seven children, so I am pro-life. However, I'm not going to push my own beliefs on any woman. Therefore, I'm not going to support a national abortion ban."

Moments after her nomination was announced, Democrats sought to exploit another potential vulnerability for Pilip: her publicly documented connection to Santos, whom she had called an "amazing friend" before he was outed as a serial fabricator who lied about his Jewish heritage and professional experience, among other things.

In conversation with JI, Pilip distanced herself from the disgraced former congressman, who is facing federal charges of campaign finance misconduct. "There is no relationship with Santos, OK?," Pilip said, stressing that she had been one of the first Republican officials on Long Island to call on him to resign, even as she acknowledged that she had campaigned with him before she became aware of his deceptions. "He lied to us. Everything he said was a lie."

"This election is not about Santos," Pilip countered, turning her focus to such issues as inflation, rising crime, border security and support for Israel in its war with Hamas, a top issue to voters in the heavily Jewish district.

Though Pilip has long been a registered Democrat, she said her official party affiliation had no impact on her own personal identification with Republican causes. "I came here to this country, I registered as a Democrat," Pilip explained. "But very quickly I realized that the Republican Party is the one who shares my values, and as a county legislator, if you really see my voting record, you will see that I am all about law enforcement, I'm all about public safety, I'm all about lowering taxes, and I'm all about securing our borders and creating safety. This is me."

Pilip said she had no objection to switching her registration if party leaders on Long Island, who have claimed they were aware of her Democratic affiliation before she was picked to run, asked her to do so. "I

don't mind changing it," Pilip told JI. "I can change it at any time because it doesn't have any meaning. The paper itself doesn't have any meaning."

Republican leaders, she said, "wanted a strong person, somebody who shared their values that they never bothered to ask me, but I can switch it at any time."

"I'm not a politician," she concluded. "I'm a simple person who likes to deliver."

The election on Feb. 13, which is expected to be among the most expensive House races in New York history, will pit Pilip against former Rep. Tom Suozzi (D-NY), a moderate pro-Israel Democrat who held the seat for three terms and is seeking to return to Congress after a failed bid for governor last cycle.

In a recent interview with JI, Suozzi acknowledged that his opponent would be a strong Republican voice on Israel, but he argued that voters would be better served electing a pro-Israel Democrat to act as a bulwark against the far left, which has become increasingly critical of Israel amid its ongoing war with Hamas.

But Pilip disputed that claim, arguing that Suozzi would be in the minority if he is sent to Congress and is "not going to have that voice," particularly in a party she argued is dominated by Israel detractors in the Squad. "All the protests we've seen here, the rallies we're seeing supporting Hamas, are because" the Democrats "gave them too much power," she said.

By contrast, Pilip said, her unique personal ties to Israel, where she served in the army before settling in New York, would only boost her standing in the House as a defender of the Jewish state.

"Israel is a big deal for me, and I want to make sure, here in the United States, that we understand what Israel is about and how important it is to continue to support Israel," Pilip, who said that some of her family members are now fighting in the war, told JI. "Israel is our true ally, a democratic country that shares our values. Nobody can tell this story more than me. Even if you are here and supporting Israel, nobody can be me. You cannot argue with that."

Born in the late 1970s, Pilip grew up in a remote village in Ethiopia with no electricity or running water, she recalled. "Sometimes you have shoes, sometimes you don't have

shoes," she joked. In 1991, she was among more than 14,000 Ethiopian Jews who were airlifted to Israel during Operation Solomon. "It was a special moment for me and my family," she told JI. "We were kissing the ground and crying because finally we had made it to Israel, our dream country, our Jewish land."

The process of acclimating as a 12-year-old to her adoptive country, however, was difficult, she said, citing her struggles to learn Hebrew and fit in at boarding school. "But life made me very strong," she said. "I learned. I chose not to cry. I chose to stick with the positive and to be myself."

Pilip joined the IDF at 18 and served as a gunsmith in a paratroopers unit, not as a parachutist as some reports have suggested. "I was in charge of all the weapons," she explained. "I had a great year and nine months in the army, when you feel you're part of this society, giving back to this country. Seeing Russians, Ukrainians, Ethiopians, all immigrants together for one goal, to protect Israel, is something that has been there for me for many, many, many years."

Later, Pilip earned a master's degree in diplomacy and security from Tel Aviv University, where she met her future husband, Adalbert Pilip, who was born in Ukraine and now works as a cardiologist on Long Island. They moved to the U.S. in 2005 and live in Great Neck. "I didn't want to leave Israel because I felt very comfortable," she said, recalling the challenges of learning a third language and adjusting to a foreign culture. "The first few years were very, very hard," she said. "But I'm a fighter, and I said, 'I'm going to make it here in the U.S.'"

In 2021, Pilip won her first campaign for office, flipping a Democratic-held seat in the county legislature. The election followed a flareup of violence between Israel and Hamas, which fueled an uptick in antisemitic incidents in New York, galvanizing her candidacy. "I have to be loud and clear and I have to bring pride to the Jewish nation," Pilip said of her thinking at the time. "I want to be a voice."

The Israeli-American lawmaker grew increasingly passionate as she discussed a renewed surge in antisemitic activity on college campuses and elsewhere as the Israel-Hamas war unfolds. "My district, my

Jewish community, is worried, big time,” she told *JI*. “We have to draw the line and we have to say no to this. We have to be proud. We have to stand tall — and we are going to draw the line by saying we are not going to be silent about this.”

As she gears up for the weeks ahead,

Pilip said it was personally energizing to imagine that she would almost certainly be the first Black and Jewish lawmaker to serve in Congress if she is elected next year.

“When I think about this race, I just remember the little girl in Ethiopia,” she said. “If somebody told me, ‘One day, you will

go to the United States of America and you, Mazi Melesa Pilip, will run for Congress,’ I would think that person had definitely lost his mind. But that is the beautiful thing about America.” ♦

DECEMBER 18, 2023

Tom Suozzi argues he'll be a Democratic bulwark against the hard left in Congress

An AIPAC spokesman said the group will not be endorsing in the New York-03 special election featuring two pro-Israel candidates

By Matthew Kassel

While in Congress, former Rep. Tom Suozzi (D-NY), who is now seeking to reclaim his old seat in the special election to replace ousted Rep. George Santos (R-NY), liked to boast that he was among the most reliable non-Jewish Democratic votes on legislation supporting Israel.

But as he makes his case to Jewish voters who represent a potentially decisive swing coalition on Long Island, Suozzi, 61, finds himself facing off against a formidable Republican rival, Mazi Melesa Pilip, whose compelling biography and strong personal ties to Israel threaten to overshadow his well-tested pitch.

The Ethiopian-born Jewish county legislator, whom GOP leaders picked as their nominee last week, is leaning heavily on her unique immigration story and service in the Israel Defense Forces as she touts her unwavering support for Israel in its war with Hamas, which is one of the top issues in the race.

Rather than competing directly with Pilip on Israel, where there are no discernible differences, Suozzi is instead promoting a more strategic message arguing that Congress would be better served by a dependably pro-Israel Democrat who, during his time in office, was outspoken in calling out members of his own party who have been strident critics of Israel in the

House.

In an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Friday, the former three-term lawmaker said there was no doubt Pilip “would be another Republican voice that is pro-Israel,” but added that it would be more “valuable” to elect a pro-Israel Democrat — at a moment when his party has grown increasingly divided on standing with Israel in the wake of Hamas’ Oct. 7 terror attacks.

“Anybody who cares about Israel and wants the relationship between America and Israel to remain strong and bipartisan, I would argue that another Republican voice is not what’s needed right now,” Suozzi reasoned. “What’s needed is a strong Democratic voice. It’s just very needed at this time.”

Whether his argument will persuade voters in the Feb. 13 election remains to be seen, particularly as Pilip and her allies seek to cast Suozzi as aligned with the far left, citing comments from a 2019 TV interview in which he expressed solidarity with the Squad after former President Donald Trump had attacked the group in social media remarks widely viewed as racist.

In a statement to *JI* on Sunday, Suozzi said his comments have been taken out of context and that he had defended the Squad because Trump’s call for its members to “go back” to the countries they came from, which he described as “un-American,” had

been made about his “Italian immigrant father after he returned from fighting in World War II.”

If there was any doubt about his position, Suozzi, a moderate Democrat, clarified that he is not aligned with the Squad on Israel. “I 100% disagree with the anti-Israel positions that some members of ‘the Squad’ have taken,” he emphasized in his statement, “and I have publicly condemned my colleagues for the particularly egregious antisemitic tropes that have been made in the past.”

“I have often spoken about my willingness to work with anyone to try and solve the problems people face, even people I disagree with,” he added. “That’s why I’ll reach across the aisle to find solutions with Republicans as well as members of my own party to try and find issues of common ground, even when I disagree with them on other things.”

At her campaign launch on Saturday, Pilip, a 44-year-old registered Democrat who was first elected to the Nassau County legislature in 2021, positioned herself as a similarly moderate voice on key foreign policy issues. “I stand strong with our communities in support of Israel, Ukraine and all nations that are subjects of terrorism,” she said in prepared remarks to a large crowd of supporters in Massapequa.

The IDF veteran served in a paratroopers unit after she was among more than 14,000

Ethiopian Jews airlifted to Israel in 1991 as part of Operation Solomon. In her speech, she also cited her efforts to fight antisemitism amid the ongoing Israel-Hamas war, which polling shows is a salient issue to voters in the heavily Jewish district covering portions of Long Island and Queens.

Like Pilip, Suozzi sought to cast his support for Israel and solidarity with Jewish constituents in a personal light, recalling his first trip to Israel as a Nassau county executive during the second intifada in 2002. "I had always been pro-Israel and said I was pro-Israel," he explained to *JL*. "But that was the experience that really made it personal for me and what made me recognize what a miracle Israel was."

"That's why I'm as passionate as I am" and "why I'm willing to battle with people, even members of my own party when necessary," he said on Friday, calling himself a "Zionist" who will "always fight for Israel."

Suozzi, who as a congressman led efforts to push the Biden administration to take a harder line on Hamas as well as Iran and Hezbollah, said there was "no place for second-guessing Israel's efforts moving

forward," reiterating comments from a recent campaign statement. "We just have to do what it takes to eliminate Hamas," he said. "It's difficult and it's painful, but we have to accomplish that mission."

He also commended President Joe Biden's approach to the war, even as the administration exerts pressure on Israel to scale down its offensive in Gaza amid mounting international scrutiny. "The president has been resolute in his support, and I encourage him to continue to stay strong," Suozzi said.

The two-month race to succeed Santos, who was expelled from Congress just a few weeks ago, is expected to be one of the most expensive in New York history, and could help decide the balance of power in the House.

It has already drawn interest from several outside groups, including the House Republican and Democratic campaign arms and the Republican Jewish Coalition, which endorsed Pilip on Friday moments after she was picked as the nominee.

The super PAC affiliated with Democratic Majority for Israel, which endorsed Suozzi's

campaign in 2020, plans to support him in the special election, according to a source familiar with the group's thinking.

Meanwhile, Marshall Wittmann, a spokesperson for AIPAC, indicated that the bipartisan pro-Israel group would not be engaging in the race, expressing satisfaction with both candidates' records on Israel. "Both candidates have reflected the overwhelming bipartisan support for a strong U.S.-Israel relationship and Israel's fight to remove Hamas from Gaza," he said in a statement to *JL* on Sunday.

As he endeavors to rejoin the House, Suozzi, who vacated the seat last cycle to mount a failed bid for governor, vowed that his comeback campaign represents a win for all parties when it comes to upholding support for Israel in Congress.

"I'm going to fight hard for support from pro-Israel Democratic groups, but also pro-Israel independent groups and pro-Israel Republican groups," he said. "I think that if you're pro-Israel, I'm one of the best people you could have in Congress to advocate for an issue we share in common." ♦

DECEMBER 18, 2023

For one acclaimed Egyptian author and activist, speaking out against Hamas has come with a price

Dalia Ziada was forced to flee her home country after calling for Egypt to embrace its peace treaty with Israel and justify the war against Hamas terrorists

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Like many others in the Middle East, when Dalia Ziada, an acclaimed Egyptian author and civil rights activist, woke up to the news of fighting between Israel and Hamas on Oct. 7, she thought it was just another round of clashes between the old foes, who for 16 years have regularly exchanged tit-for-tat rockets and airstrikes.

At least that was how it was being reported in the Arabic media in her home country, Ziada, 41, told *Jewish Insider* in an interview last week.

Two days later, however, the longtime participant in interfaith programs between Jews and Muslims was invited to join a video conference call organized by Israel's Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs. The presentation included the screening of footage from Israeli CCTV cameras and bodycam images filmed by Hamas terrorists themselves as they carried out barbaric atrocities against Israeli civilian communities and revelers at a mass music festival.

"The call was in Arabic, and I saw the

videos they had collected, including from the cameras carried by the Hamas militants," Ziada, an award-winning writer and political analyst specializing in governance, geopolitics, and defense policy in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, told *JL*.

"I saw with my own eyes how proud they were of their work and of what they had been doing. I saw they were killing people for no good reasons, raping women and kidnapping people in their pajamas from their homes, including the elderly, toddlers, children," she continued. "There was blood

everywhere, it was horrific and so shocking.”

“As soon as I finished watching, I decided I had to tell the truth,” stated Ziada.

With some 88,000 followers on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, Ziada wrote a post taking Egyptian media to task for whitewashing Hamas’ actions on Oct. 7.

“I wrote ‘our media is lying, here is the truth, here is what happened,’” she recalled.

Ziada, who has a reputation as a well-respected commentator on regional issues, was then invited by the Tel Aviv-based Institute for National Security Studies to speak about the reaction in Egypt to Hamas’ attack and Israel’s retaliatory war in Gaza. She recorded two podcasts with senior researcher Ofir Winter – one in English and one in Arabic. While she condemned “every drop of blood that is shed, whether Palestinian or Israel,” Ziada also noted that she fully supported Israel’s efforts to eliminate Hamas.

Ziada, who co-founded the Cairo-based Liberal Democracy Institute (LDI) and also serves as the executive director of the Center for Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean Studies (MEEM), is still coming to terms with what happened next.

“The INSS interview, particularly the one in Arabic, went viral,” she recounted. “And I mean, it went viral in a negative way.”

Before Ziada realized it, she was being attacked not only online but also in person, with radical Islamists calling to take “revenge” against her for her comments, which also included a similar interview with Israel’s national broadcaster, Kan. Extremist Salafists and other supporters of Hamas filed a criminal complaint against her with Egypt’s state prosecutor. Other Islamist extremists supporters visited her mother’s home in an attempt to “hunt” her down amid accusations that she was with a Zionist spy and sympathizer.

When Ziada tried to argue that she had committed no crime and that Egypt has a decades-old peace agreement with Israel, the authorities, she said, shrugged, a non-committal response that prompted her decision to avoid potential arrest and flee the country. She is now living outside of Egypt, in a location she does not wish to make public.

“I’m left with a broken heart,” Ziada told JI in an interview via Zoom from her new

location. “I left everything, my entire life, behind but this is not what broke my heart. My heart is broken because of the responses I have seen from my fellow Egyptians.”

Ziada described how Hamas’ Oct. 7 terror attack and Israel’s response had allowed “extremist Islamist voices to rise back up to the surface,” and, she said, they are “leading public opinion.”

“It’s as if everything we have been fighting against in Egypt... the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists... for the past decade has disappeared,” she explained, referring to the post-Arab Spring struggle in the most populous Arab country that allowed the extremist government of Mohamed Morsi to rise to power before it was overthrown by the more moderate regime of current Egyptian leader, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

While el-Sisi has maintained ties with Israel on the diplomatic and economic levels, Ziada said that fierce opposition to Israel’s current war in Gaza was taking public opinion in “Egypt in a very, very dangerous direction.” She said that even liberal Egyptians viewed Hamas’ Oct. 7 massacre of some 1,200 Israelis, mostly civilians, as a legitimate form of resistance.

“The Hamas massacre was a test that made everyone in the region show their true skin, including states like Egypt, even though it claimed to have good relations with Israel – overnight the Egyptian president changed from being supportive and a friend of Israel to speaking about Hamas as a resistance group and refusing to back Israel’s war against Hamas.”

Ziada said it was the same for the Abraham Accords countries, which normalized relations with Israel in 2020.

“They are all ignoring the whole thing as if Israel is not at war and as if Israel does not need their support,” she said. “They should be supporting Israel because it is fighting a war on behalf of the entire region.”

“This is a war against terrorism,” Ziada continued. “And Israel is saving the region from the terrorism of Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and all these terrorist organizations.”

“Everyone should be backing Israel now,” she said. “Unfortunately, none of them are.”

Ziada said the lack of support for Israel on a state level and the criticism of

the Jewish state by so-called liberals and moderates in the region stemmed from the different layers embedded in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

She said the Israel-Palestinian conflict should not be viewed simply as a battle between two groups of people but as part of the broader conflicts between the Arab world and Western powers and between Islam and Judaism, as well as through a local political lens.

In Egypt, Ziada pointed out, el-Sisi’s popularity had been nosediving prior to Oct. 7 because of the country’s deep economic woes and political repression. The Egyptian president, she said, is now presenting himself as a champion of the Palestinian cause because that is a popular view on the street; the situation is similar in Jordan, where King Abdullah II and particularly his wife, Queen Rania, have used the war to boost support among their population.

For Ziada, however, speaking out against Hamas and in support of Israel was a natural progression of her years involved in multifaith initiatives, she said. And, despite her now uncertain living situation and future, she told JI she does not intend to stay silent.

“I believe that regardless of our religious background or national background or our affiliations in general, we all belong to the same human family and when there is an evil group like Hamas that is trying to destroy our humanity, then we need to speak up against them,” she said.

“How can anyone with a conscience just disregard this or say that just because it happened to the Jews, then it’s acceptable – that’s insane,” Ziada said. “I feel it is my responsibility to stand up for the Jewish people and I won’t be silenced.”

“My plan is to continue writing, to continue posting things on social media, to continue speaking up in the media,” she said. “While I still have my voice, I will continue to stand up for the rights of the Jewish people and will back Israel in its war against Hamas.” ♦

U.S. visa ban on extremist settlers causes confusion

Washington seeks to respond to violence in the West Bank, but questions remain about new policy barring settlers who target Palestinians from traveling to U.S.

By Gabby Deutch, Lahav Harkov

During a quick visit to Israel on Monday, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was armed with the same agenda as the rest of the senior American officials who have traveled to Israel in recent weeks: conveying American support for Israel as it confronts Hamas, cautioning Israel to avoid civilian casualties and pressing for more humanitarian assistance to Gaza.

And like many of the other top Biden administration officials engaging with Israel, Austin was also tasked with discussing another sensitive issue, this one taking place not in Gaza but the West Bank: violence and harassment directed at Palestinians from Israelis in the contested territory.

“Attacks by extremist settlers against the Palestinians in the West Bank must stop. And those committing the violence must be held accountable,” Austin said at a press conference on Monday, standing next to Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant.

Biden administration officials have made clear that they do not believe Israel is doing an acceptable job of holding these offenders to account. Two weeks ago, Secretary of State Tony Blinken announced that the U.S. would be taking the unusual step of punitive action against these settlers — most of whom have not faced criminal charges in Israel — by restricting the ability of individuals involved in such violence to obtain a visa to travel to the United States.

“The Israeli government must do more to act against the unprecedented rise in extremist settler violence, including by holding perpetrators accountable,” a State Department spokesperson told *Jewish Insider* on Tuesday.

Human rights groups and the United

Nations have this year tracked a major increase in Jewish settlers targeting Palestinian civilians in towns throughout the West Bank near Jewish settlements. The State Department spokesperson said the violence “is at levels not seen since the Second Intifada,” citing both Jewish attacks on Palestinians and Palestinian terrorist attacks on Jews. “This includes unprecedented levels of violence by Israeli extremist settlers targeting Palestinians and their property, displacing entire communities, as well as violence by Palestinian extremist militants against Israeli civilians,” the spokesperson said.

Data from Israel’s Shin Bet, responsible for tracking and countering such violence and vandalism, indicate the opposite, that there is less of it since the war began compared to the first two quarters of the year, as well as an over 50% drop in incidents compared to the same period last year. There were 20 cases of minor violent incidents and 10 of vandalism in October this year, compared to 53 and 19 last year.

The visa policy covers both Israeli and Palestinian “extremists,” but it is more likely to have an effect on Israeli settlers, since Israelis gained the ability to travel to the U.S. visa-free earlier this year. They have also been a more frequent target of U.S. officials’ public remarks in recent weeks — including from Vice President Kamala Harris and President Joe Biden, who in October said that attacks on Palestinians by “extremist settlers” were like “pouring gasoline on fire.”

Sources with knowledge of the policy told *JI* that the visa ban is meant to serve as a deterrent to would-be offenders, and a warning to Israel’s right-wing government that Washington will take action to keep

alive its vision for a two-state solution.

Since the U.S. policy was announced, the United Kingdom followed suit with its own visa ban. Last week, the governments of 14 countries and the European Union released a joint statement calling “on Israel to take immediate and concrete steps to tackle record high settler violence in the occupied West Bank.”

But in the two weeks since the U.S. visa ban was announced, many questions about its implementation — and who it will actually impact — remain unanswered.

The timing of the announcement of the policy, coming weeks into the Israel-Hamas war, suggested a connection between Washington’s policy toward settlers and its broader posturing toward Israel, particularly as the White House urges Jerusalem to constrain its war efforts and amid increasing pressure from Democrats for the Biden administration to be tougher on Israel.

“I do also think that there’s a knock-on effect that people in the State Department are not upset about, which is that this is showing Israel that there are red lines in U.S. policy,” said Sarah Yager, Human Rights Watch’s Washington director.

Michael Koplow, Israel Policy Forum’s chief policy officer, argued that, “Were it not for October 7, this would be constant front page news. The level of extremist settler violence is unprecedented and they are taking advantage of the vacuum created by Gaza.”

Two U.S. sources with knowledge of the creation of the visa policy told *JI* that it was already underway months before the Hamas attack. Israeli newspaper *Israel Hayom* first reported on the matter in December 2022.

It's still unclear who the policy will affect. Individuals who could end up having their visas revoked, or future visa applications denied, won't have to be convicted of a crime. The restrictions will target "individuals believed to have been involved in or meaningfully contributed to undermining the peace, security, or stability in the West Bank," the State Department spokesperson said. That includes violence against people or property, "or unduly restricting civilians' access to essential services and basic necessities to include access to food, water, electricity, or medical supplies."

The State Department spokesperson said that "information is being gathered by U.S. government personnel at our embassy" and in Washington, but declined to share any specific sources of information. State Department human rights reports on the West Bank have relied heavily on information from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OCHA). An OCHA official declined to comment on Tuesday.

Gil Bringer, the former Deputy Director-General of Israel's Population, Immigration and Borders Authority, led the team working on Israel joining the U.S. Visa Waiver Program. He told JI that the countries do not exchange lists of convicted criminals – settlers or otherwise – but Israel did amend its laws so that the countries' authorities can ask each other up to 2,000 times per year whether someone trying to enter their borders has been convicted of serious crimes like murder, kidnapping or rape. In some cases, an indictment is enough to ban someone from entering.

The specific matter of "undermining the peace, security or stability in the West Bank," as the State Department puts it, did not come up in the talks between Washington and Jerusalem, Bringer said. He also noted that the policy is to revoke or not grant visas, but Israelis no longer need visas to enter the U.S.

"It's not clear to me how they'll enforce this if it's not in the framework of the 2,000 questions," Bringer said. "I know the Americans check publicly available legal information. This is not information Israel is giving the U.S. whatsoever."

That being said, Bringer noted that "a

country can always decide whether to let someone into their borders. If [the U.S.] makes a blacklist, they can always decide not to let those people in, just like [Israel] can."

Israeli officials have indicated that they do not support the visa ban, so they are unlikely to provide the U.S. with the names of those believed to be committing these acts.

Several human rights groups that track settler violence — B'tselem, Human Rights Watch, Breaking the Silence, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, Yesh Din and Rabbis for Human Rights — all told JI that while they track these incidents, they do not identify the perpetrators by name.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in November promised to act against "the few who take the law into their own hands," but he also suggested that reports about rising violence in the settlements are "baseless." War cabinet minister Benny Gantz and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant both condemned violence by Israelis against Palestinians in a press conference this month while expressing misgivings about the U.S. policy. Both opposed the use of the term "settler violence," saying it misrepresents the nearly half-million Israelis living in the West Bank, and preferring the term "extremists." Gantz said that he "suggest[s] our friends be very careful in who they're speaking out against." Gallant said that Israel "doesn't need others to tell us" to pursue those who take the law into their own hands following Palestinian terrorism against Israelis. "It is our responsibility. It is our state. Anyone using violence, certainly shooting, illegally must be arrested and dealt with."

Settlement leaders have vehemently denied that violence against Palestinians extends beyond a handful of outliers, but Israel's Shin Bet intelligence agency reportedly warned in October that the settlers' actions could cause security conditions in the West Bank to deteriorate.

In a Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee meeting last month, Otzma Yehudit lawmaker Zvi Sukkot said there is "a campaign about 'violent settlers' based on B'tselem and Yesh Din that is unfortunately catching on. These are false numbers that are harming the State of Israel. We hear

the president of the U.S. talk about it all the time, and Israel does not officially respond, unfortunately."

Sukkot has been arrested and expelled from the West Bank multiple times on suspicion of violence and vandalism against Palestinians.

Critics of the Biden administration take issue with the visa ban's targeting of people who have not faced criminal prosecution, and its equating settlers with Palestinian terrorists.

Despite the diplomatic controversy over the ban, it is not expected to have a significant impact. Roughly 500,000 Israelis live in the West Bank, and the visa ban has "targeted dozens of individuals," according to the State Department spokesperson.

Visa records are confidential, so offenders' names will not be made public unless they go to the press. Even then, it will be hard to know whether their visas were denied for this reason; they will be told if their applications are rejected, or if their current visas are revoked, but they will not be given the specific reason.

The visa bans differ from policies like the terrorist watch list because they do not deem the perpetrators a threat to the U.S. Rather, the State Department spokesperson said, their "entry or proposed activities in the United States would have potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences."

The policy, which stems from a decades-old immigration bill, is invoked somewhat frequently by the Biden administration. This year, individuals from countries including Liberia, Nicaragua, Haiti, Uganda, Russia, Honduras and Guatemala have also faced visa restrictions. The reasons range from actions that undermine democracy to participation in street gangs to human rights abuses. ♦

Meta grapples with regulating violent content in Israel-Hamas war

The Oversight Board, an independent entity that reviews the company's content-moderation decisions, found that the company's policies after Oct. 7 limited users' freedom of expression

By Gabby Deutch

The social media giant Meta on Tuesday offered a window into its handling of content related to the Israeli-Hamas war, as the body tasked with overseeing its content moderation decisions called for Facebook and Instagram to allow more graphic posts about the war to be shared in real time.

The Oversight Board, an independent entity created by Meta to review its actions removing or hiding certain content, issued two decisions on Tuesday — its first since the Oct. 7 Hamas terror attacks in Israel. Each was a response to users' appeals, after posts were removed for violating Meta policies limiting the sharing of videos depicting terrorism or violent content.

The decisions revealed that after Oct. 7, Meta lowered the bar for when it would automatically remove content that might violate the platforms' standards on hate speech, violence, incitement and harassment, in response to what it described as "an exceptional surge in violent and graphic content." But the Oversight Board determined that the change resulted in the preemptive removal of content that users should have been allowed to post.

In one case, a user appealed Meta's decision to remove their Facebook post of a video depicting an Israeli woman being taken hostage by Hamas. They had posted it with a caption urging people to watch the video to understand the threats faced by Israel. But Meta removed the post, citing a policy that prohibits the sharing of videos of terrorist attacks.

After the attack, Meta saw a change in the reason people were posting such videos: not to glorify them, but to "condemn and raise awareness" and "to counter emerging

narratives denying the October 7 events took place or denying the severity of the atrocities," according to the Oversight Board. So Meta reversed its choice to take down these posts, but still removed them from its "recommendations" algorithm. The Oversight Board said that keeping those posts from being recommended "does not accord with the company's responsibilities to respect freedom of expression."

The second case reached a similar decision: that the removal of a graphic post, and its exclusion from Instagram's "recommended" algorithm, violated users' freedom of expression. In it, an Instagram post showing the victims of an Israeli attack on Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza had been removed because it violated the company's policy against showing violent images that depict internal organs.

When both posts were reinstated, they included a "disturbing" warning and were not visible to users younger than 18.

The two decisions were the first decided under a new expedited screening process from the Oversight Board, illuminating how the slow-moving body — created in 2020 — has struggled to respond during fast-paced conflicts like this one. Meta's bureaucratic web of content-moderation policies, fine-tuned by the company as it has faced years of external pressure over its approach to trust and safety, was not entirely equipped to handle the nuanced reasons people post violent content.

Prior decisions from the board related to antisemitism also reveal how Meta's policies often mistakenly flag content that is calling out or highlighting violent speech, rather than supporting it.

Another decision released this week

reversed Facebook's removal of four users' posts quoting the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, none of which supported Nazism. Rather, they highlighted the dangers of misinformation.

A September decision found that Meta erred in removing an Instagram post that depicted someone criticizing the rapper Ye's antisemitic remarks. The video had been flagged by the platform's content-moderation systems for supporting hate speech, when it was actually condemning it. ♦

Pro-Israel advocates push the White House to redesignate the Houthis as terrorists, but say it's also not enough

Washington foreign policy experts say the U.S. will likely need to take military action against the Houthis to deter future attacks

By Marc Rod

As Houthi attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea and attempts to target Israel escalate — with growing implications for international shipping and the global economy — there's growing agreement among pro-Israel advocates in Washington that the Biden administration should redesignate the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. But many say that the FTO designation is far from enough.

Tuesday brought a flurry of new developments in counter-Houthi efforts, including the formal announcement of an expanded multinational maritime task force to protect Red Sea shipping lanes from Houthi attacks. Bahrain was the only Arab country that publicly joined that effort, but several of the U.S.'s Gulf Arab allies are reportedly privately participating. And the administration is also said to be considering military action in Yemen against the Houthis.

But the Biden administration has yet to reverse one of its early foreign policy decisions, withdrawing the Iran-backed Houthis' designation as a terrorist organization, a move that reversed a last-minute Trump administration edict.

AIPAC spokesperson Marshall Wittmann told *Jewish Insider* on Tuesday that the pro-Israel group "support[s] legislation to redesignate the Houthis as a FTO as they are Iranian terrorist proxies which threaten our ally, Israel, and global maritime security."

William Wechsler, the senior director of the Rafik Hariri Center & Middle East programs at the Atlantic Council, told JI that "to pull back a rushed, last-minute

designation and to try to give a new diplomatic approach a chance was not an irrational decision for a new administration"

But he said the time for that course of action has passed.

"Sometimes when people repeatedly tell you who and what they are, you actually have to listen to them," Wechsler said. "The Houthis clearly are a terrorist organization as they have repeatedly and intentionally targeted civilians in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE — and now in Israel and in international waters. They do not disguise these actions, proudly taking credit for them and promising to repeat them again."

The FTO designation, Wechsler and other experts said, would provide more tools to help disrupt the Houthis' financial networks, as well as provide clarity about the U.S.'s view of the Houthis.

"I think, in U.S. policy, it's good to call a duck a duck," Bradley Bowman, the senior director of the Center on Military and Political Power at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, told JI. "They have earned the title as a terrorist organization... It made sense for the Trump administration to designate them as such, and I thought it was a mistake for the Biden administration to delist them. And I think it's long past time to rectify that error."

Blaise Misztal, the vice president for policy at the Jewish Institute for National Security of America, said the designation would provide a signal of the U.S.'s "seriousness about going after the Houthis" and show "political will" to take stronger action.

"So long as it seems like we're going to tolerate what's going on, the more likely it is

to continue into the indefinite future. So that political signaling is important," Misztal said. "But certainly the FTO designation in and of itself is not going to change the dynamics in the Red Sea."

In Congress, the loudest support for the FTO designation is coming mainly from Republicans, but some Democrats are calling for the move too, and others are expressing an increasing openness to the step. The Biden administration has said previously it won't comment on potential designations or deliberations.

Discussion in the pro-Israel world has largely advanced beyond the FTO designation, though, which many see as insufficient to put a halt to the Houthis' activities.

"That the Houthi's FTO designation was ever revoked remains ridiculous; the least the Biden administration can do is redesignate these Iranian-backed barbarians as what they are: terrorists," Sandra Parker, the chairwoman of the CUFI Action Fund, the lobbying arm of Christians United for Israel, told JI. "The consequences of America's anemic policy towards Iran are now tragically on full display. As Washington once knew, one achieves peace through strength. It is our sincere hope that any redesignation is merely a precursor to meaningful action."

Shipping companies have increasingly begun to divert traffic out of the Red Sea, around the southern tip of Africa, a significantly more costly and time-consuming route.

In Washington, there's also growing discussion about potential retaliatory strikes against the Houthis, and reports suggest the

administration may be preparing such a step.

Wechsler noted the dissonance between the reported consideration of strikes and the administration's continued hesitance to impose a terrorist designation.

"It would be really difficult to explain to the American public a scenario in which we would consider the use of military force against the Houthis, and yet at the same time would not consider designating them as a terrorist organization. That would seem to me to be an untenable situation," he said.

Wechsler said the U.S. and the new task force will need to prove it can effectively deter the Houthis in order to restore regular trade flows through the Red Sea.

"The shipping companies will quickly return to the Red Sea as soon as it makes financial sense to do so, when the insurance companies change their assessment of risk there. But for that to happen it will require more than just an announcement of another maritime task force," he said. "They're going [to] need to see how effective the task force is, what kind of assets are deployed, whether they take action when needed, and thus if the Houthis are again deterred against [threatening] international shipping."

Wechsler said the U.S. is more likely to strike the Houthis if Americans are killed in Houthi strikes or the group targets American vessels directly. But he also said some form of military action will likely be necessary to restore deterrence in any instance.

"Houthi attacks indicate, by definition, that our deterrence has eroded. It is possible

for that deterrence to be reestablished without any actual use of military force, but I suspect that in the end it's going to require some kind of military response," he said.

That could entail an attack in Yemen itself or other steps short of that, including intercepting arms smuggling to the Houthis and attacking Houthi assets at sea.

Bowman and Mistzal argued that a U.S. military response, in addition to the formation of the task force, is necessary. They both noted that the new task force is an outgrowth of an existing U.S. task force which has not prevented Houthi attacks to this point.

"The Houthi attacks are likely to keep coming because they enjoy a reliable supply of Iranian weapons," Bowman said. "And they've been able to conduct these attacks with no consequences.... It's just a matter of time, I fear, until you're going to have some Americans getting killed because the Houthis feel they can conduct cost-free attacks."

Bowman said the U.S. should hit back at sites inside Yemen from where attacks are being launched, or weapons are being produced, as well as make greater efforts to interdict Iranian weapons smuggling.

Misztal agreed that a solely defense-focused response won't be sufficient to "deter and prevent [attacks] from happening in the first place."

U.S. partners, particularly Saudi Arabia, are reportedly concerned that a more aggressive response, including an FTO designation, would upset their delicate truce

with the Houthis and efforts at securing long-term peace. That concern was cited recently by Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD), the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Other U.S. partners like the UAE are said to be more supportive of stronger U.S. action.

"I'm a little frustrated with the Saudis in this moment," Bowman said, noting that they had historically been the primary target of Houthi attacks and pushed for a stronger U.S. response. He said that Saudi Arabia should be exercising pressure on Iran through its interlocutors in Beijing who brokered a detente agreement earlier this year.

"You can't expect us to sit on our hands when our folks are being attacked any more than we can reasonably expect the Saudis to sit on their hands," Bowman continued.

Misztal also argued that, without a robust U.S. response, the Houthis' attacks — so far targeted toward Israel and shipping lanes — could spill over into Saudi Arabia as well.

The administration has also been concerned that a Houthi designation could prevent humanitarian aid from flowing to certain parts of Yemen.

"I think that calculus might be changing as they get more aggressive and are starting to impact international shipping in a major way in the Red Sea," Matthew Kenney, the vice president for government affairs at JINSA, said. ♦