

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

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JANUARY 18, 2024

## U.S., Israel clash over future role of Palestinian Authority in postwar Gaza

*Biden and Netanyahu appear set for a collision over handling the PA. But it's not clear if Israel will face any consequences for rebuffing the U.S.*

By Gabby Deutch

For months, Israeli leaders have made clear that they are not on the same page as the Biden administration when it comes to the governance of postwar Gaza. The U.S. has said a unified Palestinian Authority (PA) — the governing body in the West Bank — should have control of Gaza after the war ends.

Israel disagrees.

The result is a repeated tit-for-tat between Washington and Jerusalem, where

Biden administration officials weigh in on the future role of the PA. Israel then often ignores the White House's guidance.

Consider the issue of Palestinian tax revenues being held by Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, under pressure from the far-right flank of his governing coalition, said he would not transfer certain tax revenues owed to the PA that would go to Hamas-run Gaza.

The PA, though, refuses to accept only

part of the revenue — so none of it has yet been transferred, leaving the PA on the precipice of financial collapse. Washington has sought to push Israel to transfer all of the money.

"This is Palestinian money. We've been clear that those revenues should be released to the Palestinian people," John Kirby, the National Security Council's coordinator for strategic communications, said earlier this month. Israel has not listened.

The public disagreements take place against the backdrop of an Israeli public that is both supportive of President Joe Biden and also deeply skeptical of the PA, an institution racked by corruption and widely disliked by Palestinians.

The question, then, is when — or if — Biden and Netanyahu will clash on dealing with the PA, and whether Israel will face any consequences for rebuffing the U.S.

That hasn't happened yet, perhaps because many of the disagreements remain theoretical: The finances of the PA have not yet collapsed, so Israel holding onto the revenues hasn't had a strong impact, even if that is likely to change. And the matter of who will rule Gaza after the end of the war is purely speculation until the war actually ends, which is unlikely to occur soon, even as Israel's military has begun to shift to a less intense phase.

"I think the disagreements are going to continue until Netanyahu has to actually be forced to make a choice about something, and I think he's going to continue to choose not to make the choice," said Michael Koplow, chief policy officer at Israel Policy Forum. "I don't think we're at that inflection point yet."

Secretary of State Tony Blinken said last week that he had secured a "commitment" from the PA to "pursue meaningful reform" in service of negotiating a two-state solution. Blinken has not explained what such reform would entail. A State Department spokesperson declined to comment when asked for further details on the commitment Blinken received from the PA. A spokesperson for the White House National Security Council did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

"You're talking about a governance, a government and a structure of governance that maximizes the ability of the authority to actually deliver what the Palestinian people want and need," Blinken said on Wednesday in a speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. "But it also has to be able to operate in what you might call a permissive environment — in other words, with the support of, with the help of Israel, not with its active opposition."

In the aftermath of the Oct. 7 terror attacks, Netanyahu made clear that he opposed any PA involvement in postwar

governance in Gaza. But in recent weeks, officials close to Netanyahu have signaled that they might rethink that full-throated opposition, suggesting that Israel is open to changing course as the war goes on.

"Israel is aware of the desire of the international community and the countries of the region to integrate the Palestinian Authority the day after Hamas, and we make it clear that the matter will require a fundamental reform of the Palestinian Authority," Israeli National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi wrote in a December op-ed. Days later, Netanyahu told *The Wall Street Journal* that it is a "pipe dream" to expect the PA to demilitarize Gaza after the war.

Blinken has not said whether the reforms discussed with PA President Mahmoud Abbas would include changes to the PA's payments to Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons, including many who committed terrorist attacks, or so-called "martyr payments" to the families of terrorists killed by Israeli security forces. But the PA has been resistant to ending the payments, which were targeted by Congress; the 2018 Taylor Force Act prohibits the U.S. from giving financial support to the PA so long as it pays terrorists.

"If you uphold this value of a two-state solution, then there have to be two partners that can enter into that solution," said David May, a senior research analyst at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies who studies the Palestinian financial system. "There is no Palestinian partner right now that is capable and willing to commit to enacting the compromises necessary for a two-state solution."

What remains unclear is whether the Biden administration will exact a cost on Israel for countering its public messaging about the PA.

"I think the zeitgeist of the White House is that, 'We are not an administration that goes and blasts Israel from the White House podium. We want to work things out behind closed doors,'" said The Washington Institute for Near East Policy distinguished fellow David Makovsky, who noted that Biden and Netanyahu have lately been speaking much less frequently than in the fall. "It isn't done publicly, but it's unmistakable that the administration is frustrated."

Biden and Netanyahu are both, in

part, responding to political pressures. Netanyahu is catering to his right flank, who threaten to leave the ruling coalition if he gives in on the PA.

"He's depending on [Itamar] Ben-Gvir and [Bezalet] Smotrich, and they don't want to hear the word PA," Makovskysaid, referring to two of the most extreme members of Netanyahu's coalition. Ben-Gvir, the national security minister, and Smotrich, the finance minister, disavow any Israeli coordination with the PA.

Biden, meanwhile, is working to end the war as he runs a grueling reelection campaign — and may not be in office to continue to push toward a two-state solution.

"Both Bibi and President Biden are basically arguing disparate visions for policies that they may or may not be around to implement," said Jonathan Lord, a former Department of Defense official and the director of the Middle East security program at the Center for a New American Security.

"There need to be policies discussed, not so much about the day after yet — which I submit is important — but we need to be talking more about the day in between. Because if there aren't better policy solutions posited to stabilize Gaza in the interim, I'm not sure we ever get to the day after." ♦

# At Davos, conversations about antisemitism take center stage

*A panel at the World Economic Forum on Thursday will focus on the rise in global antisemitism*

By Melissa Weiss

**W**hy is this World Economic Forum different from all other World Economic Forums?

For Jewish and Israeli leaders attending the annual conference in Davos, Switzerland, the answer could not be clearer: Conference organizers have scaled up efforts to include conversations about antisemitism and Israel at the weeklong gathering.

Earlier this week, an Israeli delegation held a screening of footage of the Oct. 7 terror attacks. Last night, Palantir CEO Alex Karp hosted an event with family members of hostages as well as some of the released hostages. On Thursday afternoon, a panel of Jewish and Israeli thought leaders will take the main stage at Davos — for the first time in the World Economic Forum's history — to discuss the rise of global antisemitism and the varied responses to it.

Speakers include Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff, Israeli First Lady Michal Herzog, Anti-Defamation League CEO Jonathan Greenblatt and Abrahamic Family House Special Interfaith Adviser David Rosen. Author and professor Timothy Snyder will moderate the session.

In between events, Greenblatt chatted with *Jewish Insider's* Melissa Weiss about the atmosphere at Davos.

*The following interview has been edited for clarity.*

**Jewish Insider:** Jonathan, you're in Davos. What is the atmosphere this year?

**Jonathan Greenblatt:** Davos has been, as always, quite interesting. There are a few things. The theme this year is "Building Trust," which is an admirable thing. But I

think the prevailing theme, I would say, is uncertainty. Uncertainty about the Middle East, uncertainty about Ukraine and Europe, uncertainty about the U.S. with the elections around the corner. So I think the thing that I'm hearing the most from people is uncertainty. So "Building Trust" is a good theme and all, don't get me wrong. I think people are nervous about the state of the world, and just unsure how things are going to turn out on a couple fronts.

**JJ:** That feels pretty understandable.

**JG:** There's also the China thing I didn't mention — uncertainty about the U.S. relationship with China, and where that's headed, some concern that that might go in the wrong direction.

**JJ:** Yes, I was watching the Blinken interview when it came up. I was wondering kind of how much that's playing into the sidelines conversations, versus, the big-picture things that we all read in the news.

**JG:** I think it's playing in a lot. I think this is the dominant theme that I'm hearing about. So some years, it's been, I would say more optimistic. This year, it's a lot of anxiety. Uncertainty is really the word — uncertainty. There are other themes here. I don't know how familiar you are with this place. Have you been here before?

**JJ:** I have not been there before.

**JG:** It's a ski town. It's a little bit like Sundance, have you ever been to Sundance?

**JJ:** You know, I don't get out very

much, Jonathan.

**JG:** Well, the street, it's got all these little shops and restaurants on it, and they're all taken over by the various companies and organizations that are sponsoring Davos. There's a lot of big tech. Big tech is everywhere. Every other house is 'something dot AI.' Everything is AI. And the Gulf countries have a big presence. There's several different Saudi houses. There is an Emirati house.

**JJ:** You are participating in a session tomorrow that's dedicated to antisemitism. I can't ever remember there being a session dedicated to antisemitism in the past. How did this come about? And what's the hope for holding one this year? It's very high level — you, Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff, Israeli First Lady Michal Herzog.

**JG:** That's right. And Tim Snyder, who has written so much about authoritarianism genocide. He wrote that important book, *Black Earth*. He's a very important historian of contemporary Europe, and he's moderating it. If you follow Davos, you know there are different kinds of programs here. So there may be programs that are off-site, or unofficial, like a panel at the Google pavilion or something. And then there are breakouts where you have all these breakout rooms with lots of content. And then there's the main stage. Not only is this, to the best of my knowledge, the first time they've ever done anything on antisemitism, it's literally happening on the main stage. So that is a steep increase over where we were before and how they've treated the issue. But I think the reason why is because it is on

the minds of so many of the participants. People are trying to make sense of this moment. And in many ways, that's what Davos is about, trying to make sense of the moment. Whether the moment is about the things we were discussing a few minutes ago: the geopolitical shocks, climate change, technological progress. And this issue of hate, but specifically antisemitism, is on the minds of a lot of people. We're trying to make sense of this explosion of anti-Jewish intolerance in America and around the world.

**JI: Have you had any conversations with [WEF founder] Klaus Schwab about the inclusion of conversations on antisemitism?**

**JG:** I have had conversations with Klaus this year about including it as a topic. I'm really glad that he made that decision.

**JI: Like we said, these are very high-level speakers who are coming to talk about that. To me, that underscores the degree to which they're taking it very seriously at the World Economic Forum.**

**JG:** You're right. The high-level speakers, putting it on the main stage — those are indications of the level of priority that they are giving this. I think, for Klaus and the organization, which haven't tackled this before, if there was the time to do so, this is the time. But I will certainly tell you in my conversations with different attendees, and I've been coming for a few years, I have heard many people come up to me and say, 'What is going on in the United States?' or Americans saying, 'What happened with those university presidents? What's going on on these college campuses? What is going on in the media?' I've had a number of conversations just like that.

**JI: It's fascinating to me that the questions you get are about what's going on in America and no longer what's going on in Israel because I feel like for the first couple of months [of the war], that's all anyone wanted to ask about. But it really seems as though the more immediate concerns and worries are now happening stateside.**

**JG:** Well, I do think a number of people have approached me to talk about the Israel-Hamas war as well. People have asked questions about, you know, 'What are you hearing? What do you think of Israel's approach? Are you concerned about what the day after will look like?' I'm hearing a lot of that, too. But definitely antisemitism is simply front and center. Look, in prior years, Israel is always on the agenda. I've seen prime ministers and presidents here. I've seen other members of the Israeli diplomatic and business elite here at Davos. But the conversations were, if I could use the term, somewhat Abrahamic before. As in how's it going with UAE, and where are we going with Saudi? But now it's much more focused on: 'What's the state of the war? How will it be resolved, what is the day after going to look like?'

**JI: You attended the screening of the footage of the Oct. 7 terror attacks last night, right?**

**JG:** I did.

**JI: I'm curious what the reaction was to the film last night.**

**JG:** So pretty much everyone walked out of the room either crying or just shell-shocked and silent. Nobody spoke as they filed out of the room. I think people were just overwhelmed, and just stunned. I mean, you've seen it so we don't have to elaborate on it, but it is so graphic and it is so terrible.

Eyal Waldman [whose daughter was killed at the Nova festival], he kind of introduced it, and kept his composure, talked about his daughter. And we talked a lot about the litany, the chain of events, really the litany of mistakes and misses. And it was hard to hear. And so you heard that and then we saw the footage. I think what really gripped people was the level of celebration, the celebratory nature of these Hamas terrorists while they cut off heads, while they shot children, while they stepped on corpses, while they mutilated bodies. The 'Allahu Akbar' and the other chants, the audio recordings of them calling back to Gaza in a jubilant, sort of gleeful way. That hit all of us very hard. By the way, these are a group of very high-level people in the room.

**JI: Last week, we covered the ADL report that came out that found a significant uptick in antisemitic incidents. But in a change this year, you folks also started counting demonstrations for the first time and so I'm curious what drove that change.**

**JG:** We've looked at this issue for years and years and years. And sometimes a slogan or a phrase may appear in a certain context, in a certain setting, maybe used in a certain way which is benign, but chanting in front of a Hillel 'From the river to the sea,' which is a Hamas slogan, is intended for one purpose and one purpose only: to intimidate Jewish people, to terrorize people inside that Hillel. So, you know, again, you can talk about 'Free Gaza' in certain contexts, and certain scenarios and certain settings, and it's not a problem. But vandalizing a business owned by a Jewish person with the words 'Free Gaza' is intended for one purpose — to terrorize Jews. So again, there can be the use of the term 'intifada' in a certain context or scenario or the setting where it was a description of the events that took place in the late '80s and the early 2000s. And it isn't an issue. However, when you chant, again, at Jewish students banging on the windows of a building in which they are sort of barricaded out of fear of physical violence and you chant 'Intifada, revolution is the only solution.' These are not benign. These are not expressions of some abstract idea. These are actions and we should call them actions. They are not statements. These are actions that are intended to terrorize Jews. And so that's why we call them out as we did, and that's why we will continue to call them out. ... There may be people who say, in a certain context, 'I wasn't trying to be racist.' We don't define racism necessarily by the intent of the person who made a comment, right? We define it by the felt impact of the people who hear that or read that or experience that. And so again, what we're talking about here is this indisputable impact that these words and actions have when they are weaponized, with the intent of intimidating and polarizing Jewish students.

**JI: The ADL has been operating on college campuses for many years. But**



**what we're seeing now is unprecedented. Between the resignations of President Liz Magill at UPenn and President Claudine Gay at Harvard, do you think we've crested and the worst has passed? What are the challenges that really lie ahead?**

**JG:** The resignations of these presidents and the statements by the universities, these are just moments in time. We're going to judge these institutions based on not what they say but what they do. And so whether it's how they update and expand their DEI programming, whether it's how they apply consequences to student organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace or Students for Justice in Palestine, that seriously violate their codes of conduct and target and intimidate and threaten Jewish students, whether it's ensuring that those Jewish kids or Israeli kids don't experience discrimination. There's some deterrence created by applying

consequences when that happens. So we will judge these institutions based on, again, what they do, not what they say.

**JI:** I'm glad you brought up the DEI programming, because one thing that we're seeing now in the wake of October 7, is this push by the organized Jewish community to not necessarily get rid of DEI but to reform it. And that was an interesting choice, because it feels like the community has really railed against DEI, but has made the decision that rather than burn the whole thing down, to try to reform it from the inside. You think that there's a chance of being successful?

**JG:** I think the question is, how do we move through the scenario and ensure that there are environments created where Jewish people, and Israelis as well, are treated fairly, where their issues are well

understood. And that the people who again, use intolerance or you know, use hate to discriminate and intimidate them are dealt with accordingly. And so, DEI is here, and, you know, at ADL we believe that diversity education is really important. We live in the most heterodox, multicultural society in the world. Understanding your peers, your colleagues, your employees — understanding them, knowing their histories, ensuring that you can approach the issues from a more informed perspective, I think that makes you a better peer or a better manager or a better leader. You are able to demonstrate empathy. But if DEI perpetuates not diversity, equity, inclusion, but the exclusion of Jews and Israelis, we have a problem. So my hope would be that we will see the change that will ensure that Jewish people are going to be treated with decency that are treated fairly and that are treated in the same manner as all others. ♦

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## Jewish students file complaint against American University over handling of campus antisemitism

*On campus, pro-Palestinian protestors have blocked Jewish students' access to dining halls and classrooms, while dorms have been vandalized with swastikas*

By Haley Cohen

One Jewish student at American University was screamed at in class by a fellow student, "You are responsible for genocide." Another was hauled in to the administration and is being investigated for filming students ripping down posters of Israelis held hostage by Hamas in Gaza. And in one AU class, a professor allegedly drove a Jewish student to leave in tears with her emotional praise of pro-Palestinian protests, turning a hard stare to her that other students parroted.

In response to these and other other incidents targeting Jewish students at AU, the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human

Rights Under Law and Jewish on Campus on Wednesday filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) against the university, alleging violations of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

"AU is a hostile environment in every aspect of the campus for Jewish students," Deena Margolies, the Brandeis Center lawyer who is overseeing the complaint, told *Jewish Insider*.

"There are no places on campus that aren't hostile for Jewish students. They're harassed in their bedrooms. They're harassed in classrooms. They're harassed

when attending a vigil [for Oct. 7 victims]. There were already a number of problems on campus for Jewish students prior to Oct. 7, however it has since exacerbated greatly."

"We're not asking that Jewish students be given extra protection, we're asking that they be treated equally at AU and they're not. They are discriminating against Jewish and Israeli students," Margolies continued.

The 26-page complaint, which was shared exclusively with JI, details how since Oct. 7, pro-Palestinian protestors have blocked Jewish students' access to dining halls and classrooms, dormitory doors and posters have been vandalized with

swastikas and posters of Israeli hostages have been repeatedly torn down. It claims that the university “chose to further harass and discriminate against several Jewish students by subjecting them to a baseless disciplinary hearing for using their phones to record individuals tearing down posters of Israeli hostages.”

Lauren Cayle, a junior who is majoring in sociology and minoring in Jewish studies, is one of the students under investigation by the university for recording individuals tearing down hostage posters. “We were being followed and harassed by people ripping down the posters as we went,” she recalled. “It was very upsetting. Now we’re being investigated for standing up for ourselves. We’re potentially facing disciplinary action.”

Margolies said disciplinary proceedings would be “further evidence of harassment for Jewish students by the university. Because instead of addressing harassment they are facing by other students, they are allowing these students to continue to harass Jewish and Israelis students by investigating perfectly lawful recordings that were taken in public.”

Cayle described the climate on campus for Jewish students as “scary, tense and very hostile.” She told JI that a pro-Palestinian protest on campus on Nov. 10 “was unlike anything I’ve ever experienced.”

“Policies were not enforced,” she said. “Students were using megaphones and purposefully trying to disrupt classes. It was completely out of control. Police did not intervene. There’s a double standard that is being held. I’ve previously hosted [Israel events] on the quad and we were told to keep the volume down... these protestors were not held to the same standard. I couldn’t focus in class. It was scary and overwhelming, I was shaking,” Cayle continued. “Jewish students do not feel safe on campus. I’m constantly checking my surroundings and the administration has completely abandoned us. There has been no condemnation.”

Among incidents cited in the letter includes one in which an AU professor devoted class time to sharing photos from pro-Palestinian protests, which she projected onto a large screen. The professor allegedly praised the protests, sharing how meaningful and powerful they were for her

— including a photo that showed a sign of a Star of David in a trash can with the caption, “Keep the world clean.” According to the complaint, the professor stared at a Jewish student in the class to the point that many of the other classmates turned around to also stare at the student, resulting in the Jewish student walking out of the class in tears.

In another alleged classroom incident, a peer screamed at the only Jewish student in class, “I do not want to sit on the same side of the room as this Zionist,” and “You have blood on your hands. You are responsible for genocide.” Neither the professor nor the administration addressed the conduct, according to the complaint.

The complaint notes a double standard, writing that “while the university took prompt and effective action in response to incidents of Islamophobia, AU officials repeatedly ignored the antisemitic discrimination and harassment Jewish students reported to them. The university neglected to investigate antisemitic conduct or take the necessary steps to eliminate the mistreatment Jewish students endured.”

Julia Jassey, co-founder and CEO of Jewish on Campus, said in a statement, “Where the law is clear, AU officials have failed... Ignoring these experiences is tantamount to tolerating them. We urge a swift investigation and a campus climate where no student has to endure such harassment.”

Cayle expressed hope that filing the complaint will allow Jewish students at AU and other schools “to never have to deal with what I am dealing with.”

“I never thought I would be in this situation,” she said. “I don’t want to have to hide my Jewish pride, but this is our reality.”

As a response to the rise in antisemitism on campuses following Hamas’ Oct. 7 terrorist attacks in Israel, the Education Department released an updated complaint form in November, making it easier to identify religious discrimination for students alleging that their civil rights had been violated under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Title VI requires any programs receiving federal assistance “to provide all students a school environment free from discrimination based on race, color, or national origin, including shared ancestry

or ethnic characteristics.” Between Oct. 7 and Nov. 7, the Education Department’s OCR received 12 complaints of discrimination on the basis of “shared ancestry,” a department spokesperson told *Jewish Insider* in November, noting that some complaints may allege actions prior to Oct. 7, and that there may be additional complaints that haven’t yet been logged by regional staff. Seven of the logged complaints involve antisemitism. ♦

# Meet the college president unafraid of speaking out against terrorism

*Oakland University President Dr. Ora Hirsch Pescovitz immediately condemned Hamas for the Oct. 7 terror attack, and faced minimal pushback*

By Haley Cohen

While much of the attention around campus antisemitism has focused on elite private universities — and has centered on administrations' inability to defend Jewish students — not all colleges have faced the same challenges.

The president of a small, lesser-known public university in Rochester, Mich., was among the first to strongly condemn Hamas' Oct. 7 atrocities, releasing a statement just hours after the attack and differentiating herself from counterparts who waffled over a response.

"We are shocked and horrified by the unprovoked acts of brutality by Hamas terrorists in Israel," Dr. Ora Hirsch Pescovitz wrote on Oct. 7 to Oakland University, a school with a diverse student body where Arab-Americans make up a significant share of attendees.

"Whole families, including grandparents and infants, have been massacred or kidnapped from their homes. Our hearts go out to all the civilians who are victims of this senseless violence. The victims and their families are in our thoughts as we hope for a rapid and peaceful resolution of this crisis," the statement continued.

Pescovitz was hired to lead the university in 2017, making her the school's seventh president and second Jewish one. She attended Hebrew University and, as the daughter of a rabbi, one of her first goals in the position was to help create a warm environment for Jewish students at the school.

Pescovitz came to her current position after she practiced and taught pediatric endocrinology, ran a hospital in Indianapolis, headed the University of Michigan Health System and served as senior vice president

at Eli Lilly and Company.

She recently sat down with *Jewish Insider* to discuss the challenges of leading a university amid unprecedented antisemitism on college campuses.

**Jl: Oakland University, which is near Dearborn, Mich., has a large population of Arab and Muslim students — significantly larger than the school's Jewish population, which makes up only 1% of the student body. Did you receive pushback for your statement in solidarity with Israel? What is the climate like for Jewish students currently at OU? Have Muslim students asked you to speak out about civilian deaths in Gaza?**

**OP:** When my statement came out after Oct. 7, I received many hundreds of direct letters and comments that were hateful and vile. But I am not certain that they came from my own campus. My statements go to my campus and are public on the site, so I suspect that many of the comments I received may not have come from my own community.

Compared to the other public universities in the state of Michigan, and across the country, we have a much calmer morale, a more peaceful environment. We do not have a very active Students for Justice in Palestine group.

I have not been asked to speak out directly about civilian deaths in Gaza by Muslim students but [my original statement and the two follow-up statements] do address the tragic loss of life, including [of] innocent civilians.

**Jl: Have there been incidents of**

**antisemitism at OU? The Hillel on campus has a Campus Climate Initiative chapter — is that because things were getting tense?**

**OP:** I am unaware of any major acts of blatant antisemitism on my campus. However, if they have occurred, they have not been brought to my attention and I suspect they may be subtle. We are proactively participating in CCI and also our leadership is actively participating in comprehensive Anti-Defamation League training.

**Jl: Are you surprised that few colleges have followed in your footsteps in terms of moral clarity post-Oct. 7?**

**OP:** I was at first somewhat surprised but as I have learned more about the climate and spoke with presidents at other universities I have become less and less surprised. I think there are a number of reasons why presidents have not spoken out, and I think they themselves are less clear on what the right thing to do is. They may have been conflicted in terms of what their actual beliefs were. I myself was not conflicted. Other presidents believe that Hamas was right and don't want to speak against those students who believe that. Candidly, it's not easy being a president today. One of the things that made it easier for me was that I spoke early before it became more difficult to speak out.

Many university presidents, as a result of the Israel-Hamas conflict, have decided they should no longer weigh in because this was such a complex area and they see it as two-sidesism. This is hypocrisy because they weighed in on George Floyd, the Supreme Court decision on abortion, the decision on

affirmative action, the war in Ukraine. All of a sudden to not weigh in on antisemitism on their own campuses is cowardice. It really is an abdication of the responsibility of a university president to lead.

At the same time, I believe very strongly in free speech rights. It is important that we protect free speech and the rights to protest on campus. That includes hearing things that even I don't want to hear because that is the First Amendment, which even protects hate speech. Many of my Jewish supporters don't like to hear this. Even private universities should follow the First Amendment because they receive federal funds.

**Jl: You co-wrote an op-ed for *The Hill* with Rep. Haley Stevens (D-MI) on Dec. 15 headlined "Where the Harvard, Penn and MIT presidents dropped the ball on hate speech" as a response to the Ivy League university presidents' congressional hearing. University of Pennsylvania President Liz Magill and Harvard University's Claudine Gay have stepped down as a result of that hearing. How would you have handled testifying differently, and would you have liked to see more of an acknowledgement of wrongdoing?**

**OP:** University presidents also have the right to free speech, as individuals and as presidents. What got the presidents into trouble during last month's congressional hearing was that they had not only the right, but the obligation, to condemn antisemitic hate speech, to teach their campuses that hate speech can lead to hateful actions, and they did not do that. What made them particularly vulnerable to that criticism was that they had previously permitted hateful speech and antisemitism on their campuses. They had denounced other forms of hateful speech on campus like the use of wrong pronouns or fatphobia, things that are tiny compared to antisemitism. That was the ultimate hypocrisy. What they should have done was clearly denounce antisemitism. The fact that you permit it, doesn't mean that you shouldn't condemn it because speech can lead to action.

University presidents should be hired and fired by their boards, not by Congress.

Their performance at the hearing was unacceptable, but I do not believe it is up to me to decide whether they should be presidents of their institutions.

**Jl: One of your first acts as OU president was creating the position of chief diversity officer to oversee the university's office of diversity, equity and inclusion. DEI has received criticism for excluding Jewish students and some have called for it to be dismantled. Do you think that the existing DEI framework can be reformed to include Jewish students?**

**OP:** I have been thinking a lot about DEI even before Oct. 7 and the polarization we are seeing more and more of. My life has been infused by the civil rights movement and DEI. When I worked as a physician, which was a big part of my career, I focused on inequities in health care. But what often happens with very good things is we can swing too much in a particular direction, and what is happening now is we are beginning to reduce complex societal issues into categories that result in a reductionist approach. We now call people racist or anti-racist, powerful or powerless, oppressed or oppressor, colonizer or colonized. As we have done that in our DEI offices, many have created exclusion instead of inclusion, which is the purpose of DEI offices. It isn't just Jews that have been excluded but Jews have primarily felt the wrath of this. We have Jews, who have been among the most oppressed minorities, have become the other and are viewed as the oppressor. It is a horrific backlash to what the original intent was of diversity, equity and inclusion. I am very worried that the backlash of the right, which is to start defunding all DEI offices, is going to throw out something excellent and result in something really bad. But it has pushed too far in the wrong direction, and I do think in many places DEI has contributed to antisemitism, it is very frightening. I would not throw out all of the intent of DEI.

Just yesterday, I had a request from the Holocaust Memorial Center in Detroit. I contacted our DEI office about having us go there and they jumped at the opportunity. Had there been a fundamental antisemitic attitude, they would have rejected that.

**Jl: Should there be restrictions on federal funding (such as NIH grants) to those universities that do not take steps to curtail pro-Hamas activity on campus?**

**OP:** This is a slippery slope. I do not think there should be any penalty for free speech, including speech that I find abhorrent. I find "from the River to the Sea" genocidal to say. But groups that say that should not necessarily have their funding withheld.

I've heard students on my own campus say that. They need to be educated, not doxxed. They shouldn't have grants withheld. Most are not educated and don't even know the geography of where Israel is.

Anyone supporting Hamas, a terrorist organization, should not receive federal funding. But is speech supporting Hamas? That's a complicated question because many students and faculty do not know what they're saying.

**Jl: Are there plans at OU to expand education about why slogans like "from the River to the Sea" are "genocidal," as you describe them?**

**OP:** We have a center for civic engagement where a professor in the political science department is working on an educational series that confronts a variety of complex topics. We've already debated *Roe v. Wade* and held sessions on the Abraham Accords and antisemitism. We are planning a series on educating about the complexity of the Israel-Hamas situation, not just for the campus but also the broader community.

**Jl: You come from a family of prominent Jewish leaders. Your father, Rabbi Richard Hirsch, was the founder of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and marched in Selma, Alabama, with Martin Luther King. Your brother, Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, is the senior rabbi at Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York City. How does your upbringing influence your role as a university president, especially now?**

**OP:** [Ammiel] has very strong views and has a challenging position — it's not only university presidents who have challenging



positions right now.

I grew up in the civil rights movement. I sat on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and heard Martin Luther King give his “I Have a Dream Speech.” The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were written in my dad’s office. My father gave the MLK eulogy for the Jewish community

in Washington. Civil rights are personal to me and are deeply connected to my view of tolerance.

I’m very proud to be Jewish but I do not approach my job as a Jewish president. I don’t approach my job as pro-Israel. I approach my job and this situation as doing the right thing.

As president, I adhere to four guiding principles: my responsibility to protect the safety of all members of our community; to support free speech and assembly; to differentiate between free speech and unlawful harassment; and to provide moral clarity and education by speaking out when unjust, immoral and evil acts occur. ♦

JANUARY 17, 2024

## Bipartisan group of lawmakers calls Biden to fully reimpose Houthi terror designation

*Some lawmakers, mostly Republicans, are arguing the Biden administration is still not getting tough enough with the Houthis*

By Marc Rod

After a wave of positive initial feedback from top Republicans and Democrats to the Biden administration’s plan to redesignate the Houthis as a terrorist group, some lawmakers are growing less enthused as more details of the strategy have emerged.

The administration designated the Houthis as a Specially Designated Terrorist Group, but not a Foreign Terrorist Organization — a classification that grants separate authorities and penalties — and implemented a series of carve-outs to the sanctions on the Houthis imposed under the SDTG label.

In a Wednesday press conference, John Kirby, the National Security Council’s strategic communications coordinator, said the administration sought to preserve humanitarian access inside Yemen. It initially rescinded the FTO designation in 2021, imposed by the Trump administration, out of concern that it would prevent providing humanitarian aid to Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen.

“This particular designation gives us more flexibility, but it also gives aid organizations a higher level of comfort, that they’ll be able to provide this assistance without running afoul of sanctions,” Kirby

said. He added that the administration is willing to reconsider the SDTG designation if the Houthis’ attacks stop.

Most Democrats on Capitol Hill — even those who had pushed for the FTO label — are standing behind this approach.

But Sen. Jacky Rosen (D-NV) said in a statement to *Jewish Insider* that the administration should reapply the tougher label as well.

“The Houthis are a terrorist proxy of Iran’s regime, and I’ve called for their designation as a terrorist organization,” Rosen told JI. “While I support today’s designation, we should go further and formally label the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in order to fully crack down on the flow of arms and funding to them.”

Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH) also endorsed that course of action.

“We must cut off the illicit funding for Iranian-backed terrorist groups like Hamas and the Houthis, who are attacking civilians on merchant ships,” Brown told JI. “While designating the Houthis as a terrorist group is a necessary step, the administration should go further to cut off their funding and support by labeling them a Foreign Terrorist Organization.”

And Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA), pointing

to his work on the Intelligence Committee, said he agreed that the FTO designation is a needed step.

“The Houthis are terrorists backed by Iran and as a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, I have been focused on strategic steps the U.S. can take to eradicate their influence,” he said. “This designation is a step in the right direction, but the Biden Administration needs to formally designate the Houthis a foreign terrorist organization and take additional steps to hinder their ability to terrorize the region.”

Rosen, Brown and Casey are all up for re-election this year.

Rep. Jared Moskowitz (D-FL), who helped author a letter to the administration last year calling for the FTO designation, indicated that he’s satisfied with the steps the White House has taken so far.

“[The president] has designated them as a terrorist organization, something I asked for several months ago,” Moskowitz told JI. “I’m happy to see the administration take such an aggressive posture with the Houthis, not just trying to eliminate their capabilities, but also trying to be proactive to stop the Houthis from taking further actions in the Red Sea.”

Pressed on whether reapplying the FTO designation would have constituted a more aggressive step, Moskowitz praised Biden for keeping the conflict between Israel and Hamas contained.

“I think the president has stood by our ally Israel,” Moskowitz said. “He has been as aggressive as he possibly can, while also balancing the other issues in the region to not give Iran any reason to make this a wider war.”

Republicans on the Hill, meanwhile, argued that the SDTG designation wasn’t strong enough. House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) described the move as “continued appeasement.”

That view was shared by Florida Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL). “Unlike the SDTG designation, an FTO designation bans members of a terrorist group from entering the United States and makes it a crime for any U.S. person to provide assistance to it,” Rubio said in a statement to JI.

“It’s unconscionable that the Biden Administration still believes groups that aid the Houthis should not be penalized and that they can still enter the U.S., even while it bans them from using our banks and while Houthi rockets target American military and civilian ships.”

Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX), had threatened to force a Senate floor vote on reinstating both

designations if the administration did not take action on its own. Cruz “doesn’t believe that half-step will work but is evaluating the situation in the region,” a Cruz spokesperson told JI.

Rep. Mike Waltz (R-FL), who co-led the letter with Moskowitz, told JI the SDTG designation is a “half-measure.”

“And as long as the administration continues to deal with the tentacles, and not the head of the snake, we’re going to continue to be in this problem,” Waltz said. “As long as Iran is flush with cash, we’re not going to get out of this problem.”

AIPAC spokesperson Marshall Wittmann told JI the group sees the move as a positive step, but said the FTO designation remains necessary.

“We appreciate the administration’s action as a first step in recognizing the Houthis as a terrorist danger to regional stability,” he said. “More action is necessary to designate the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization as we confront its malign activities against our troops, international shipping and our ally, Israel.”

Richard Goldberg, a senior advisor at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies who has called for the FTO designation to be reimposed, described the SDTG and FTO designations to JI as “complementary, not mutually exclusive” tools that provide

different authorities and should be used together.

The FTO designation makes individuals or entities providing material support to the group liable for criminal prosecution and is “very broad... and it’s difficult to create any sort of workaround,” Goldberg explained, “so you create an immediate chilling effect” on business with any individuals who might be involved with the Houthis. It also makes any Houthi members ineligible for U.S. visas.

The SDTG designation, he continued, is “a very fancy way of saying we’re imposing sanctions, under our terrorism sanctions authorities.” It alerts financial institutions and others that doing business with the Houthis could subject them to financial sanctions.

But Goldberg argued that the waivers to the sanctions that the administration announced effectively “gutted the designation” as a SDTG.

“We are in a very bizarre, convoluted policy environment now, where we consider the Houthis terrorists, but we don’t want economic pressure on them,” Goldberg said. “We’re willing to use military force against them, but we want to ensure that assistance of all kinds can continue to flow to them to legitimize them as an actor in Yemen.” ♦

JANUARY 17, 2024

## Palantir convenes high-level gathering in Davos to support Israeli hostages

*Families of hostages urged attendees to do whatever they can to push for the freedom of captives in Gaza*

By Matthew Kassel

The software giant Palantir hosted a high-level gathering on Wednesday at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, with family members of Israeli hostages held in Gaza as well as freed Israeli captives, who described their

experiences in searing detail and urged attendees to show support for the remaining abductees.

In a series of emotional speeches to a packed room at Palantir’s pavilion on the promenade in Davos, the audience, which

included a number of top tech and business leaders, heard a range of accounts from Israelis affected by the violence.

Participants at the event, hosted by Palantir CEO Alex Karp, were moved to tears when Rachel Goldberg-Polin showed

footage of the moment her 23-year-old son was brutally abducted by Hamas terrorists from a music festival targeted during the Oct. 7 attack in southern Israel. Goldberg-Polin challenged participants to take action in whatever way possible to bring the hostages home.

Noam Peri, an Israeli whose 79-year-old father was abducted by Hamas, read a quote from Elie Wiesel and implored attendees to speak up on behalf of the hostages.

Nili Margalit, an Israeli nurse who was held in Gaza for nearly 50 days, described feeling guilty for leaving the other hostages behind, some of whom she had been helping with medical treatment, she said. Her father, Eliyahu, was killed by Hamas but his body remains in Gaza. In her remarks, Margalit urged the room to do everything in their power to help the hostages.

Moran Stella Yanai, a jewelry designer who was captured at the music festival, recalled countless panic attacks as well as a constant fear of being raped following her abduction by Hamas.

Eyal Waldman, whose daughter Danielle was killed at the music festival with her boyfriend, also addressed the room, where

participants were given yellow ribbons, a symbol of solidarity with the hostages, as well as dog tag necklaces reading, in English and Hebrew, “Bring them home — now!”

The event was attended by several high-profile figures across business, media, politics and philanthropy, including Andy Jassy, the CEO of Amazon; Michael Dell, the founder and CEO of Dell Technologies; Nicola Mendelsohn, a top executive at Meta; Alexander Taylor, the CEO of Cox Enterprises; Martin Sorrell, the founder and former CEO of WPP; and Bill Browder, the CEO of Hermitage Capital Management.

In a nod to Palantir, Yossi Vardi, an Israeli entrepreneur and investor who gave remarks at the gathering, praised Karp for continuing to stand with Israel.

Palantir has been among the most outspoken companies expressing support for Israel and opposing campus antisemitism in the wake of the attacks. The data analytics firm, which held its first board meeting of 2024 in Tel Aviv earlier this month, said last week that it had agreed to a strategic partnership with the Israeli Defense Ministry to assist the country in its war against Hamas in Gaza.

The company also launched an initiative in December to recruit Jewish students who have feared for their safety amid an uptick in antisemitic incidents on college campuses across the country.

The event on Wednesday also featured remarks from Albert Bourla, the CEO of Pfizer, who watched footage of Hamas’ atrocities screened at Davos on Tuesday. Victor Halberstadt, a Dutch Holocaust survivor who teaches economics at Leiden University in the Netherlands, and Meirav Eilon Shahar, Israel’s ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, spoke as well.

Among other participants, the gathering included two former Israeli Knesset members, Tzipi Livni and Stav Shaffir, as well as Jonathan Greenblatt, the CEO of the Anti-Defamation League; Fred Kempe, the CEO of the Atlantic Council; and Ken Weinstein, the Japan chair at Hudson Institute.

Two journalists from *The New York Times*, Bret Stephens and Andrew Ross Sorkin, and Ben Smith, the editor in chief of *Semafor*, were also present at the event. ♦

JANUARY 12, 2024

## Van Hollen emerging as leader of progressive Senate bloc critical of Israeli policy

*The Maryland senator has led efforts to place conditions on emergency aid to Israel and raised concerns about its military operation against Hamas*

By Marc Rod

Maryland’s Senate delegation is set to jump to the left on Israel policy in 2025, with the retirement of Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD), the state’s longtime senator and a pro-Israel stalwart. That means Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), emerging as a leading critic of Israeli policy in the Senate, will soon be one of the most senior lawmakers in the state.

Since Oct. 7, Van Hollen — who entered

the Senate in 2017 as the preferred candidate of the pro-Israel community, with their support — has led lawmakers in raising concerns about Israel’s military operations in the West Bank and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, which he has attributed in large part to Israeli policy decisions.

He’s leading an amendment seeking to place conditions on most emergency aid to Israel and other U.S. allies — requiring

assurances that they will comply with U.S. humanitarian efforts before they can receive aid — following previous calls to place limits on U.S. aid. (Van Hollen and other supporters have eschewed describing the amendment as conditioning aid.)

On Wednesday, Van Hollen and Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-OR) — following a trip to the Middle East last week — raised concerns that restrictions, particularly those

imposed by Israel, are preventing relief for the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Their trip didn't include a stop in Israel.

At the same time, Van Hollen has continued to defend Israel's right to defend itself and eliminate Hamas' military capacity, and has not directly called for a cease-fire, like a growing number of his progressive counterparts in the House.

Van Hollen argued in a statement to *Jewish Insider* that it's not him, or his positions, that have shifted, but Israel.

"I am and always have been a strong believer in the U.S. partnership with Israel and remain a steadfast friend of the Israeli people," he said. "My position on Israel has not changed – what has changed is the ever-rightward drift of the Israeli government culminating in the current Netanyahu coalition comprised of far-right extremists like [Finance Minister Bezael] Smotrich and [National Security Minister Itamar] Ben-Gvir."

Van Hollen continued: "Like President Biden, I will fight for a two-state solution as the only viable way to protect a homeland for the Jewish people and create a more stable, secure, and just future for both Israelis and Palestinians. And I will continue to support Israel's security and the right to defend itself, including eliminating the military threat of Hamas and securing the release of hostages."

But the differences between Van Hollen and Cardin have been growing more apparent. The same day Van Hollen critiqued Israel for not allowing enough humanitarian aid into Gaza, Cardin spoke at an Orthodox Union luncheon, where the senator highlighted the volume of military equipment that had been smuggled into Gaza despite international inspections.

"For those that think it's easy to get humanitarian assistance into Gaza, think about all the military supplies that were accumulated that were used against Israel," Cardin said. "That was [brought] into Gaza through supposed inspections at the border. Israel has a responsibility to make sure that Hamas is not being resupplied."

Despite their differences, Cardin defended his colleague's approach to Israel policy.

"Senator Cardin and Senator Van Hollen work together on all issues imaginable. They agree on many and disagree on some. On

Israel, they both are supporters of the Jewish state and the need for a two-state solution," a Cardin spokesperson told *Jl*. "Both were outraged by Hamas' attack on Oct. 7. Over the years, both have been critical of the Netanyahu government. They also both are open to discussions with constituents and others with varying viewpoints."

Van Hollen maintained a generally pro-Israel record when he ran for the Senate as a longtime congressman from Montgomery County, just outside the nation's capital.

Campaigning against former Rep. Donna Edwards (D-MD), who long had a rocky relationship with the Jewish community over her criticism of Israel, Van Hollen was widely seen as the more pro-Israel candidate in the race with vocal backers among the Jewish community on Israel issues.

In the House, Van Hollen regularly joined and supported legislation and letters supporting Israel and pushing back on criticisms of Israel — a particularly striking contrast with Edwards' record.

"To be pro-Israel in the race against Donna Edwards is not hard," Ron Halber, the executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington, which includes D.C.'s Maryland suburbs, told *Jewish Insider*. "She was anti-Israel, she was terrible for Israel... Of course Chris was by far the most pro-Israel candidate in that race, easily."

Barbara Goldberg Goldman, a longtime Jewish Democratic leader in Maryland, said she supported him "very strongly" in 2016 because she saw him as "very, very supportive of Israel and Israel's right to defend and protect itself" as well as a "very staunch supporter of a two-state solution." She added that she also supported his broader platform on a range of domestic issues, like affordable housing.

At the same time, Van Hollen's record on Israel, even before his Senate campaign, offered hints toward his current stance — he's never been fully aligned with the pro-Israel community, even if he maintained stronger relations than Edwards.

Most notably, in 2006, during Israel's war with Lebanon, Van Hollen argued in a letter to the Bush administration that the Israeli operation had overstepped its legitimate goals of attacking Hezbollah military assets and had instead victimized the Lebanese

people. He called for a cease-fire, arguing that the continued military campaign would be contrary to U.S. and Israeli interests, and that the U.S. should encourage Israeli restraint.

Some of the language in Van Hollen's letter is very similar to that which progressives have deployed regarding Israel's current campaign in Gaza.

Van Hollen, under criticism from pro-Israel groups, said at the time that his letter was aimed more at criticizing the then-U.S. administration and was not an attempt to argue Israel's operation was illegitimate.

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt, the senior rabbi of Congregation B'nai Tzedek in Potomac, Md., who also leads the Zionist Rabbinic Coalition, said that he has been meeting with Van Hollen and his staff dating back to Van Hollen's time in the House.

"He was never an easy [or] sure vote in support of Israel, even then," Weinblatt said. "At the end of the day, more often than not, he came around. But it was always quite clear — to me at least — that support for Israel and understanding the conflict from a perspective that's sympathetic to Israel was [never] in his perspective or outlook."

But, he added, it "wasn't really too hard of a choice to make" in the 2016 race between Edwards — "someone who was known to be unsympathetic and antagonistic towards the Jewish state" — and Van Hollen, who "we could count on... to be at the end of the day supportive of Israel."

The Maryland senator's more outspoken criticism of Israeli policy, and U.S. policy toward the region, began well before Oct. 7.

His involvement appears to have intensified beginning in the late stages of the Trump administration in 2020, amid discussions of potential Israeli annexation of the West Bank, when he helped lead efforts to oppose such a move.

In the years since, he's become outspoken on Israeli policies toward the Palestinians, warning that they might endanger the viability of a two-state solution.

He has helped lead or been a prominent voice raising concerns about possible conditions for a Saudi-Israeli normalization deal, resisting Israel's quick entry into the U.S. Visa Waiver Program, advocating for the reopening of the Palestine Liberation Organization's Washington mission and the



U.S.' East Jerusalem consulate, criticizing Israeli evictions of Palestinians in the West Bank and settlement activity, and pushing for greater U.S. scrutiny of the killing of Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh.

Van Hollen told JI that what he characterized as the shifts of the Israeli government “ha[ve] harmed the best interests of both Israel and the United States — from the Netanyahu coalition’s attempts to restrict democratic rights to the expansion of settlements and outposts, to the more recent complete denunciation of a two-state solution.”

Van Hollen has remained supportive of elements of the U.S.-Israel relationship broadly, including supporting annual missile-defense aid to the Jewish state.

Weinblatt said that he feels, based on the senator’s increasingly outspoken activism, that the senator has “growing antipathy towards Israel,” particularly in recent years, and has felt “more liberated to publicly express” critical views, although he said he doesn’t believe the senator harbors any “malicious feeling” toward Israel or Israelis — unlike members of extreme left in the House.

Weinblatt believes Van Hollen has “quite often put the onus on Israel for there not being a [two-state] solution and for the

ongoing stalemate” and has frequently “given the Palestinian Authority a pass, and has not held them responsible for their actions, and how they’ve contributed to the hostilities.”

Weinblatt said frustrations with Van Hollen’s positions on Israel come up frequently in conversations with others in the pro-Israel community, describing the senator’s growing leadership role among critics of Israel as a particular source of frustration.

Goldberg Goldman said she was not familiar with Van Hollen’s proposed amendment to the aid package and doesn’t support conditioning aid to Israel, but that it wouldn’t be a dealbreaker for her overall support for the senator.

“If he were to try to condition aid to Israel, I would be adamantly opposed to it,” Goldberg Goldman she said. “And I’d like to convince him to look at it differently... But there are a host of other issues where I’m aligned with him.”

She added that she thinks it’s understandable to be critical of positions taken by Netanyahu and his government and remain supportive of Israel as a nation — as many in the U.S. Jewish community have.

Halber described Van Hollen’s relationship with the Jewish community

as a “mixed bag” — highlighting that many Jews in the community support Van Hollen’s overall progressive domestic agenda and that he’s also been key in helping to secure Nonprofit Security Grant Program funding for Jewish institutions.

He emphasized that Van Hollen has been supportive of baseline pro-Israel issues such as annual military aid, replenishing Iron Dome batteries and sending aircraft carriers to the region following the Oct. 7 attack — as opposed to far-left lawmakers like the Squad in the House — but said he thinks Van Hollen is concerned about what he sees as the shrinking possibilities for a two-state solution.

But, Halber continued, discussions and calls for conditioning aid to Israel, especially in the middle of a war and in the aftermath of Oct. 7, are objectionable to many in Maryland’s Jewish community.

“I think he’s just furious with the Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu],” Halber said. “I think Chris is part of that progressive, respected mainstream that views the conflict as somebody who supports Israel, but wants the government of Israel to seriously begin undertaking a two-state solution, but views the prime minister and his reliance on a small number of right-wing parties as an impediment.” ♦

JANUARY 18, 2024

## Saudi-backed Ma’aden’s CEO on the gold mine beneath the kingdom

*The Circuit catches up with Bob Wilt, who came to Davos to flag ‘the third pillar of the Saudi economy’ – metals mining*

By Kelsey Warner

*The article first appeared in The Circuit.*

Saudi Arabia is sitting on a gold mine. Also phosphate, bauxite, copper, zinc and nickel. Analysts have called the

estimated value of its mineral resources – last put at \$2.5 trillion – one of the most significant potential contributors to its economic transformation ambitions.

*The Circuit* caught up with Bob Wilt,

who moved from California to Saudi Arabia two years ago to take up the helm of one of the world’s fastest growing mining operations, on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos.

This interview has been condensed and edited for length and clarity.

**The Circuit: Saudi Arabia has a big presence in Davos this year. Why have you come to the World Economic Forum meeting, what are you looking to get out of this trip?**

**Bob Wilt:** That's right. We are just coming off the heels of the Future Minerals Forum, a third edition in Riyadh last week, where we brought at least 80 government delegations to Saudi Arabia to discuss the mineral potential of the kingdom. And we're following up this week with meeting with partners and meeting with other mining companies, just to make sure the world knows that the third pillar of the Saudi economy is going to be metals and mining. We're getting great responses. So, you know, there's a lot of interest in the kingdom in general, in diversification of the economy, and part of that is obviously metals mining.

**TC: A recent headline from *The Economist* said it well: Saudi Arabia wants to be the Saudi Arabia of minerals. Ma'aden has embarked on the largest exploration project in the world. Can you talk about the significance of what you're looking for, and the size and scale?**

**BW:** I joined the company [in February 2022] with the prospect that the mineral endowment of the kingdom was \$1.3 trillion. And they subsequently announced last week that the potential is probably two and a half trillion dollars. And a lot of that is the result of the work that we've done in exploration over the last 18 months.

But as I've talked to most of the mining CEOs globally, last week and this week, I've yet to come across any major company that is spending as much or drilling as much as Ma'aden is. If you look at the mineral endowment of the kingdom, about 40% is phosphate, which we've got a great handle on, and we've developed an industry around, so we're very pleased with that. But then if you look at the rest of the endowment, it's copper, it's gold, it's nickel, zinc. Rare earths are in there.

So we're looking for all of the above. And we just had great luck. We've had great luck already with gold, we announced a pretty

massive gold discovery towards the end of last year, adding another probably 10 million ounces in that discovery. So we know we're gold-rich. And now we're just looking to see what other transition minerals are available in the kingdom.

**TC: Although it's no stranger to drilling, to digging, this is a fairly steep scale-up for Saudi Arabia in a new industry. How much are you investing as a company into setting up to do what you're doing?**

**BW:** I think saying we're new to the industry is, Ma'aden is 25 years old. We started as a small gold mining operation out of the government offices of energy and petroleum 25 years ago, but during the course of the 50s and 60s, the kingdom along with the U.S. Geological Survey had discovered phosphate and bauxite. So we developed an aluminum industry and a phosphate fertilizer industry in around 2009, 2010, 2011.

We've really been at this industrializing minerals for a decade or so. But yeah, that is fairly immature when you think about Rio Tinto celebrating its 150th anniversary this year. As far as how much we're spending, what we're developing, there's a broad spectrum of where the spending is occurring. So we'll probably spend 50 to 60 billion U.S. dollars in building out the infrastructure of the mining industry if this plays out the way we want it to by 2040. There's a massive capital spend required in terms of building the mines and building the processing plants so that we think are potential in Saudi. But there's also the exploration. We're spending on average about 120 to 130 million U.S. dollars annually on exploration. We just did an agreement with King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals. We partnered with them and donated 100 million SAR, about \$27 million to develop a mining degree program there. We're attacking this on all fronts: human capital, talent, capabilities, exploration and infrastructure build-out. It's a massive undertaking.

**TC: There seems to be more focus amid the energy transition to pay more attention to environmental impact as compared to the prior era of industrial mining. Is that naive to think this industry can change?**

**BW:** I think that's exactly right. If you think about some of the challenges we faced in the industry, part of its image, and we at Ma'aden don't have legacy issues. So we're not dealing with undoing mistakes of the past. We're operating with a fairly clean slate. We're able to take advantage of technology and cut the cycle times of exploration, from six weeks of processing data down to six days and things like that.

We do have the advantage of being the new kid on the block, if you will, with not having to fight legacy issues. But at the same time, we're the victim of those issues in terms of talent and capabilities. You know, there's like 17 people graduated in all of Australia last year with mining engineering degrees. There's six universities in the UK that don't allow mining companies to come and recruit on campus. Now, as a mining leader, I'm probably going to triple the size of my workforce in the next 10 or 15 years and I'm going to need talent, not only from Saudi Arabia, but from everywhere.

If you think about it, the energy transition is going to require six to nine times as many minerals over the next decade or so as we've got now. But there's nobody to do the mining, there's nobody to do the geology, nobody to do the exploration. It's a huge issue and risk for the industry is how do we attract talent? And part of that is addressing the image of our forefathers that didn't do such a great job.

**TC: It seems too tidy to frame the narrative as Saudi Arabia emerging to support the energy transition, as the world's second-biggest oil producer. But how significant of a role does Saudi Arabia plan to play in the global transition away from fossil fuels?**

**BW:** Prince Abdulaziz [bin Salman], our Minister of Energy, spoke last week at the Future Minerals Forum and said that whether it's fossil fuels or the energy solutions of the future, Saudi Arabia wants to lead the way. And whether we have the minerals in the ground in the kingdom to support that transition, or we become the processing hub. For the energy transition, Saudi Arabia will play a key role for sure. That's very clear to me. ♦

# As war devastates Israeli agriculture, Leket pivots from ‘rescuing’ produce to buying it, boosting farmers

*While still providing food to Israel’s poor, the organization has shifted its focus to ensuring the survival of the country’s domestic agricultural production, providing volunteers, grants and loans*

By Judah Ari Gross

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

The Israeli food security nonprofit Leket has dramatically shifted its focus in the wake of the Oct. 7 terror attacks and ongoing fighting in southern and northern Israel, halting the vast majority of its normal food rescue efforts and concentrating much of its work on bolstering Israel’s farmers and agricultural sector.

Leket, which marked its 20th anniversary last year, had planned to rescue 29,000 tons of produce from Israeli fields — fruits and vegetables that for some reason weren’t worth it for farmers to sell and would otherwise be burned or left to rot — and millions of prepared meals from army bases, hotels and cafeteria in 2023, but in the final quarter of the year, that all went off the rails.

“Ordinarily our focus is on using excess crops to feed the poor. That hasn’t changed. That’s still what we would like to be doing. We’re still doing it, but it’s just dropped by 80%,” Joseph Gitler, the founder and chairman of Leket Israel, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*.

The Israeli agricultural sector has been devastated by the war in multiple ways. For some of the farms along Israel’s borders with Gaza and Lebanon that were hit by rocket and missile fire, simply accessing them has been next to impossible. But also for farms throughout the country, the war has driven away nearly all of the foreign nationals who work as farm hands, and many of the Israelis who work in agriculture have also been called up to the reserves.

While Leket is still dedicated to food security, ensuring that Israelis experiencing poverty are able to obtain sufficient, healthy foods, the organization is now also focused on a larger, national understanding of food security — ensuring that the country can produce the food that all of its citizens need.

Gitler noted that the attacks on cargo ships in the Red Sea by Yemen’s Houthis and the growing antagonism from some of the countries that provide much of Israel’s imported produce have driven home the need for Israel to maintain its domestic food production capabilities, even though locally grown fruits and vegetables are almost always more expensive than their imported counterparts.

“I think it strengthens this idea that we really need to keep our farmers in business,” Gitler said. “We always need to find the middle ground between keeping food and vegetable prices reasonable, but also protecting our farmers.”

Instead of rescuing the vast majority of the food that it gives to some 275 nonprofits who, in turn, distribute it to thousands of Israelis in need, Leket has been purchasing it from farmers, often at market rates.

“Since Oct. 7, we’ve re-engineered,” Gitler said. “Everything is focused on: How do we help the farmers? So that’s sending them volunteers. And normally, when we send volunteers to help a farmer, we take the crops. That’s the whole idea of Leket. But now, everywhere we send volunteers to, we don’t take the crops. And if the farmer can’t sell them, we’re willing to buy [the crops]. And we’re doing that for two reasons. One, we want to help farmers. We need them to stay in business for the short- and long-term

food security of this country. And [two], we need those crops to take care of the poor.”

Leket is also working with two non-bank lenders — Ogen and Koret Israel Economic Development Funds — to develop new low-interest loan programs specifically for farmers. (At least a portion of this loan program will be supported by the Jewish Federations of North America recently announced loan fund.) In addition, Leket has partnered with the Strauss food company to create a \$10 million grant fund for farmers.

“There will also be, at some point, government loans and government grants, but that’s going to be a long time coming,” Gitler said.

Gitler said Leket was still working on the exact details of the loan program with Ogen and Koret, but intended to offer loans of up to NIS 300,000 (\$79,500) to farmers at low interest rates.

“Interestingly, we first thought, no-interest [loans],” Gitler said. “But both [Ogen and Koret] feel that super low interest is better than no interest. It actually gets people more motivated to pay back. We want them to pay back. We hope they’re going to pay back.”

Even before the war, Leket was the second-largest volunteer operation in the country, after the volunteer-run Magen David Adom ambulance corps. In the aftermath of the Oct. 7 attacks, Leket has remained one of the more significant volunteer coordination organizations, helping direct tens of thousands of volunteers to farms around the country, where they weed, harvest, sort and pack fruits and vegetables of all types. Dozens of volunteers also come each day to

Leket's logistics center outside of the central Israeli town of Kfar Saba, working in three shifts to package the rescued and purchased produce into boxes. Many of the volunteers, both on farms and in the logistics center, are retirees who have ample free time and are looking for ways to help.

"They feel that as civilians, they can't help in the war itself, so this is a way for them to contribute," Maayan Hadad, one of Leket's volunteer coordinators, told eJP during a recent visit to the logistics center.

One such regular logistics center volunteer, Madelein, who moved to Israel in 1969 — "Just in time for the Yom Kippur War," she chuckled — said the work was tedious and, at times, tough. "But if I can do it, then it's the least I can do," she said. "In the previous wars, I was younger and could

do more."

In addition to volunteering with Leket, Madelein, who declined to give her last name, said she also baked cakes and cookies for soldiers. "You do anything you can," she said.

According to Gitler, it is not yet clear how much of Leket's current operations will remain once the war is over, both in practical terms of purchasing — instead of rescuing — crops and more broadly with its focus of boosting farmers and domestic agriculture.

"I can't tell you what's going to be in the future. I think I can tell you that our work with farmers has changed permanently," Gitler said.

"Our farmers are going to get used to the fact that we've been purchasing [their crops]. And the fact is, that's life. We tell the farmers

that what we're doing is temporary, but it's been three months and we just approved our 2024 budget. And as part of the budget, we approved the continued purchase of 8 million pounds of crops over the next three months," he said.

Gitler said he believed that over time, the amount of crops that Leket purchases would go down, but likely not down to zero, and the amount it rescues would go back up, but other aspects of the organization's current work would continue.

"Helping farmers with volunteers where needed, that may continue," he said. "Even when it's just for the good of the farmer. Because there are so many people who want to volunteer, so why not? That could be something that takes a more permanent place." ♦

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## 500 Global's Courtney Powell predicts accelerated M&A activity in 2024

*The Circuit catches up with the Riyadh-based venture capitalist in Davos*

By Kelsey Warner

*The article first appeared in* The Circuit.

Courtney Powell, COO and managing partner of San Francisco-based venture capital firm 500 Global, came to the World Economic Forum in Davos this year with a message for investors: Watch out for the Middle East and Africa.

Before heading out to meet up with her old pal and OpenAI boss Sam Altman, she shared in an interview with *The Circuit* how 500 Global navigated a tumultuous 2023, her predictions on exits and deal appetite for 2024 and her best advice to investors looking to make moves in the Gulf.

Powell, who moved to Riyadh three years ago, is a veteran investor in emerging markets and one of 500's MENA-focused funds has raised \$43 million so far. The

parent fund has \$2.7 billion in assets under management. This interview on the sidelines of the Davos conference has been condensed and edited for length and clarity.

**The Circuit: This is your first trip to Davos. Why did you decide to come this year and are you here for 500 Global or are you wearing your 500 Global Middle East hat?**

**Courtney Powell:** Always global... We're really trying to get the message out there with a report that we've just released: a look at the top 30 most compelling venture markets. And the message behind that is that entrepreneurs should absolutely be accelerating GDP and economic growth. And so that's the message that I'm typically

talking about these days.

**TC: What are the hotspots?**

**CP:** The Middle East is going to continue to be an economic powerhouse moving forward. But Africa as well. So we liked what we're seeing coming out of Senegal, Nigeria. And Rwanda is starting to pick up their support of entrepreneurship. Southeast Asia also.

We launched our first fund in Southeast Asia, I think, in 2013 and we had six unicorns out of that first fund. So we definitely are seeing a move into the later rounds now, seeing more coming from Vietnam, Cambodia, and some of the newer markets that are taking shape, although we already have two unicorns out of Vietnam. So yeah,



you pick a country I can talk about.

**TC: I want to talk more broadly about 2023, a tough year for VC. How did you navigate and how are you feeling about 2024?**

**CP:** I think as an entrepreneur, what we're hearing from our portfolio and witnessing was the fact that you had three or so years where capital was really abundant and I think decisions were being made pretty quickly. And 2023 was definitely a reckoning in the sense that all of a sudden people started talking about unit economics, people started talking about the exit market.

So for us, having been investing for over a decade now, we've seen the ups and downs. We were fortunate not to be too aggressively affected by that and we're just really frank with our portfolio in terms of "time to stay disciplined. Now, if you have the cash in the bank, it didn't matter if you had growth coming from organic growth or you can continue to afford to buy growth for whatever reason and be one of those folks to move ahead. But by and large, it was a little bit of a more austere time.

And then I think on the venture side, 500 was in a good position because we have a number of funds with a lot of diversification amongst the countries we're investing, the stages we're investing in. So we didn't experience too much of an issue. But I think what we saw in some of the markets, especially where we're training emerging fund managers, I think emerging countries struggle. Fundraising is really tough. And I think if you haven't shown [returns to investors] or you just don't have a track record, it's a very difficult time.

**TC: And you are currently raising a MENA-specific fund.**

**CP:** We have a variety of funds right now. We are limited actually, we're really regulated about what we can say. Suffice it to say that we will continue to raise funds, continue to deploy in the Middle East in particular, we have active seed funds right now to Series A. And even into later stages because we're able to invest out of our global funds into the region.

**TC: That's a real issue right now, or it always has been in the region. Seed capital is widely available. And even the big check sizes, of course, are available because you have the sovereign capital. It's that middle abyss.**

**CP:** That's music to my ears whenever I hear people articulate that accurately.

We've made almost 400 investments across the MENA region. And we have 14 or 15 companies in our portfolio, that are valued at over \$100 million. So we definitely see the need for capital that goes even beyond what the sovereigns are able to provide. I think that is a gap. There are a number of funds that I'm aware of that are coming to market, actively fundraising to be able to make that leap, which I'm really glad to see. I was hoping to see a little bit more international interest.

**TC: So far the exits we've seen in the region have been M&A, a couple SPACs. So 2024, are you thinking more of the same?**

**CP:** 2024 is actually going to be an even more aggressive M&A market. I'm already catching wind of that. I think there will be a few big deals announced pretty soon. M&A continues to be a really strong exit pathway. However, I will say that there are six or seven companies across our own portfolio that we think have IPO potential. But I think that's going to be in the next few years, not necessarily imminent.

I see a lot of people talk about, oh, there's going to be 1,000 unicorns. We tend to take a much more conservative approach, because we've just seen the entire pipeline now since 2018. Unless they're seeing deals that I'm not, I struggle to see that. However, one other point you'd like to make about the exit markets, that's Tadawul [Saudi Arabia] and the ADX [Abu Dhabi], I think have a very, very strong chance of becoming even more popular markets to list particularly coming not just the region, but Africa and Southeast Asia, and even Eastern Europe.

Saudi in particular, I think what they're making their Tadawul to be able to enable foreign capital to come in, hopefully see some dual listings in the future. You no longer have to simply target the exchange

in London or New York. We're really going to see a shift over the next five to 10 years where the Middle East will be strong.

**TC: Last question, what advice do you have for people thinking about moving to the region?**

**CP:** My advice for people in our industry moving to the region is it takes a year to form a thesis about the region, a year to figure out why you're wrong and a year to fix it. It's really easy to come in and kind of think you know what's what. And, there's a lot of expertise among financiers, and venture capitalists in the region, and there's a lot to learn. So I hope that you come in with really just listening and trying to understand why the region has evolved the way it has and look at themselves as a contributor. They're not creating anything. There's already a vibrant, strong community of entrepreneurs and venture capitalists. ♦