Over the past five and a half months, Israel’s former ambassador to the U.S., Michael Oren, has given hundreds of interviews to international media outlets, penned multiple op-eds, and spoken to countless communities worldwide about the horrific events on Oct. 7, the existential threats facing Israel and its war against Hamas in Gaza.

Yet, he told Jewish Insider in an interview this week, he has received little support from the Israeli government, including any kind of formal briefing or even a list of comprehensive talking points that could help him to get Israel’s vital message across.

Previously a deputy minister in charge of public diplomacy for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Oren said that instead, a private PR firm sets up his media appearances and often he must remind interviewers that he’s not an official representative of the State of Israel but a volunteer and the views he expresses are solely his own.

“That’s all fine,” Oren, who is also an author and a historian, told JI, “But it would be nice if, every once in a while, when I really need an answer, I could reach somebody official.”

While some Israeli leaders take a defeatist outlook, citing rampant international antisemitism and hatred of Israel as a reason for the bad PR, Oren and others interviewed for this report said simply improving basic tactics like a better understanding of the specific audience officials are speaking to and improving bureaucratic organization and structure would offer some help in the court of international public opinion.

Now, with even some of the fiercest supporters of Israel questioning the Jewish state’s actions in the Gaza Strip, public diplomacy or “hasbara” – as Israelis have traditionally called it – is playing an increasingly pivotal role in how the country’s actions could play out at home, in the battlefield and on the world stage.

In a phone call on Monday, President Joe Biden cautioned Netanyahu about carrying out a sensitive operation in the final Hamas stronghold of Rafah, where more than a
million displaced Gazans are sheltering, and requested that the prime minister send a delegation to discuss tactics in the war. Last week, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY), a lifetime supporter of Israel and the highest-ranking Jewish elected official, sharply criticized the Israeli leader’s handling of the war.

The issue of failing public diplomacy has even become cause for concern in Israel that the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee questioned the prime minister Tuesday on his government’s PR strategy. In response to a question about whether there has been enough investment in international hasbara, Netanyahu responded “of course not.”

“But it’s not just a lack of money,” he reportedly said. “There simply are no people, you are surrounded by people who can’t put two words together [in English]. We need to find them.”

“Israel is failing miserably in its public diplomacy, we’re just really bad at it,” said Yaakov Katz, a senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute and a former editor-in-chief of The Jerusalem Post, told JI.

“There’s no discipline and there’s no unified message,” Katz, who also worked as a foreign policy adviser to former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, continued. “Essentially, anyone in the government can do [and say] whatever they want.”

He pointed out there have been far too many examples of the prime minister pushing a certain policy, while the ministers do or say something completely contradictory. By default, said Katz, that means official bodies such as the army operate with little or no PR strategy and they don’t always consider the view of Israel worldwide.

“One perfect example is that we’re fighting a war in Gaza and we’re saying that we’re creating a plan for the day after and then two senior ministers in the government go to a rally calling to resettle the Gaza Strip,” said Katz. “How do you then explain to the world that you don’t plan to resettle the Gaza Strip?”

The dissenting messaging, Katz said, derived directly from Israel’s political structure. He pointed out that in the U.S. “if the secretary of transportation were to say something about the Gaza war, or about the U.S. war in Afghanistan, he’d be out of a job because it’s completely inappropriate, but in Israel, the minister of transportation will tell you how you should be fighting the war in Gaza, even though that minister is not supposed to comment.”

This week the lack of discipline came into sharp focus when Israeli government spokesperson Eylon Levy, who has become internationally recognized through his media appearances since the Oct. 7, Hamas attack, was reportedly suspended from his role after fighting publicly with U.K. officials on social media.

An additional problem, Katz continued, is that there are “too many cooks in the kitchen and no clarity of who is in charge.”

“This is an historic problem, although there have been attempts to fix this,” he said, giving the example of recent images released by the army showing arrested Hamas terrorists stripped and blindfolded. “To an Israeli audience this is great but to the rest of the world, it is awful.”

Katz pointed out that for any kind of PR, there are multiple target audiences – the local audience, the international audience and more.

“Who is making these decisions? Who decides what the target audience is and are they even thinking. I’m gonna make my Israeli audience feel great but what will be the impact around the world?” he said. “The army has this data and footage, and they can do whatever they want with it and they’re not thinking it through, but again, that comes down to the fact that there’s no coherent policy of how they’re supposed to consider things.”

“One of the other big problems for Israel, as I see it, is that we’re not articulating what we want to see happen in the Gaza Strip the day after the war, and that creates a lot of frustration around the world,” Katz continued. “No matter how good your PR is, or how great your spokespeople are, that cannot make up for bad policies.”

Michal Cotler-Wunsh, Israel’s special envoy for combating antisemitism, said that not only must Israel better organize its public diplomacy efforts – and sharpen its messaging – it must urgently recognize that the war for public opinion is a no less serious war front than the war on the ground.

When it comes to Israel, she explained, “there is an unconventional war for public opinion that has been raging for decades.”

Cotler-Wunsh said that after a series of conventional wars seeking to destroy the State of Israel failed, “Israel’s enemies turned their attention to the war for public opinion, systematically co-opting and weaponizing international institutions, mechanisms and principles to demonize, delegitimize and apply double standards to Israel.” She noted the 1975 “Zionism is racism” resolution at the U.N., the 2001 Durban Conference, which labeled Israel an apartheid state and undermined its legitimacy to exist, and, most recently, “the Orwellian inversion of facts and law accusing Israel of perpetrating a genocide, even as it defends itself from genocidal terror group that committed war crimes and crimes against humanity, and openly declares intent to commit them — again and again.”

“We need to recognize that this unconventional war for public opinion is a national security threat,” Cotler-Wunsh continued. “If that is not reflected in the way Israel prepares for this unconventional war, creating and executing a multifront, holistic national strategy that includes allocation of resources, we’re just reacting from the dock of the accused on which Israel has been seated, we’re just responding, which is where hasbara comes in, we are explaining all the time.”

The former member of Israel’s parliament said that she stopped using the term hasbara because it already assumes that Israel has done something wrong, and demands Israel “explain itself.”

“More than ever, Israel needs an authority mandated to roll out and implement a national strategy for combating antisemitism, recognizing that this is a part of the war that’s raging,” Cotler-Wunsh said.

Oren, who recently returned to Israel from a two-month speaking tour in the U.S., said that amid soaring antisemitism – and the fact Jews are vastly outnumbered around the world – “we must not give up speaking out for Israel.”

He outlined several areas where Israel’s public diplomacy strategy is flawed and needed to be addressed.
First, Oren said that deeply ingrained in the Zionist ethos is the idea that it is not important what the non-Jews think about the Jews.

“Secondly, we are a nation of 9 million who are up against 1.4 billion Muslims with vast resources – even with all our technological know-how and innovation, numbers and resources count,” he said.

Another issue, Oren pointed out, is that Israel’s “narrative is far too complex.” While the other side uses a few powerful key words such as occupation, apartheid, oppression, imperialism, Israel’s story “is far too long and convoluted.”

“We are now living in a post-factual world where facts are meaningless and only feelings count,” he said. “Our whole explanation relies on facts, when everyone else is talking about feelings.”

“But the real reason, the conclusion I have come to after years of being involved in this, is not that we are up against 1.4 billion Muslims but that we are up against 2,500 years of antisemitism,” Oren said. “If you look closely behind the headlines, you see classic antisemtic tropes... accusations that Israel purposely massacres innocents or kills journalists on purpose.”

However, while the odds are stacked against Israel, Oren emphasized that Israel must still make every effort to fight back against disinformation.

“Of course, we have to fight this,” he said. “But we have to be realistic in what we can achieve, and we cannot forget that we are the Jewish state and as a Jewish state we are going to be judged by a different set of criteria.”

MARCH 20, 2024

Israeli and Jewish artists face threats, boycotts at U.S. shows

Matisyahu had shows canceled in three cities on his current tour; he’s scheduled to perform in Washington, D.C. tonight

By Gabby Deutch

Inside a hotel ballroom in Atlanta last month, the Israeli pop star Netta Barzilai played a private show at a conference for pro-Israel college students. Audience members screamed gleefully as Netta — the 2018 Eurovision Song Contest winner is a first-name-only kind of musician — took the stage.

A few floors below, one of Netta’s team members faced a different kind of reception as they checked in. When her staff member handed their Israeli passport to the hotel employee working at the front desk, the receptionist asked: “How does it feel that your country is killing babies?”

A spokesperson for Hillel International, which organized the concert and brought Netta to the U.S., said they brought the incident to hotel management, who removed the hotel employee from the front desk. “Netta Barzilai’s concert and the remainder of the Israel Summit continued without further incident,” the spokesperson said.

The incident reflects the atmosphere of intimidation that increasingly surrounds Israeli and Jewish artists performing in American venues. In Netta’s case, the show went on without a hitch. But other performers have faced boycotts and cancellation.

Matisyahu, a Jewish singer and rapper, has had shows canceled in Arizona, New Mexico and Illinois on his current tour — instances that he alleged were motivated by antisemetic protests. Many of his other performances took place while protestors marched outside. On Saturday, protestors gathered outside Paradise Rock Club in Boston and chanted, “Paradise, Paradise, you can’t hide, you’re supporting genocide.”

Matisyahu is not Israeli.

Protests are also planned for his Wednesday show at the 9:30 Club in Washington, D.C., by activists who accuse him of “artwashing racism and Zionism” and co-opting Black music because of his reggae style.

“He is just a Jewish artist that is getting attacked as if he is Israeli, as if he was an IDF soldier,” said Ari Ingel, director of Creative Community for Peace, a nonprofit that works to spread support for Israel in Hollywood and among musicians. “That is really beyond the pale. That is when, quintessentially, anti-Zionism becomes antisemitism.”

The protest of performances by Israeli artists, and Jews who have been vocally supportive of Israel, is a new phenomenon in the U.S., which has until recently avoided the brunt of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement that emerged...
in Europe and targeted cultural institutions there over the past two decades.

The harassment and cultural sanctioning of Israeli artists is particularly apparent with the eccentric annual Eurovision Song Contest that Israel has won four times. The organizers are under immense pressure to bar Israel from this year's event, set for May, a move they have declared they will not do. But this week, the venue that hosts London's biggest screening party for the Eurovision finals canceled the event entirely to protest Israel's participation in the contest.

Israel does not have a lot of allies in the American music scene, or at least not many who were willing to speak up after the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks in Israel. There has been similar silence, by and large, in the face of the Matisyahu cancellations and threats to shut down Israeli and Jewish performers.

"It's just another example of the shameful nature of our business, that not every single artist and agent and manager is standing up screaming, 'We will not stand for this.' Because it's not a one off," John Ondrasik, a singer-songwriter who performs under the stage name Five for Fighting, said. Ondrasik in January released a song, "Okay," reflecting upon what he saw as moral failure among artists and leaders after Oct. 7.

The trend does not stop with musicians. In January, anti-Israel protestors disrupted an event with the author Moshe Kasher, who was speaking about his new book in conversation with the actress Mayim Bialik, an outspoken supporter of Israel. Kasher's book, a chronicle of American subcultures, had nothing to do with Israel; Bialik was only the moderator of the event.

But protestors continuously interrupted the event, shouting expletives and playing a recording on a loudspeaker to drown out the speakers, a lengthy ordeal that ended with the protestors being removed. PEN America, the literary organization that hosted the event, said in a statement that two other authors had recently declined to participate in events with the group because of its ties to Bialik.

When the comedian Jerry Seinfeld did a show in Albuquerque in February, protestors affiliated with a local socialist group organized a protest called "shut down racist Zionists Jerry Seinfeld." Signs accused Seinfeld of "supporting genocide." Another said "hands off Rafah" — a reference to a Palestinian city in which Israel is planning to mount an operation. Seinfeld, despite a recent visit to Israel, is American; he has no involvement in Israel's war effort. The Jewish actor Brett Gelman, known for his role in "Stranger Things," said a West Hollywood bookstore canceled his planned book talk due to "antisemitic intimidation."

Amit Peled, a renowned Israeli-American cellist and a professor at Johns Hopkins, only faced protests at a show once prior to Oct. 7. In recent months, they've become common. Peled has ended each of his shows since October with Hatikvah, Israel's national anthem. He usually shares a few words about Israel before he plays the song.

"At this point in my career, I feel that it's actually more important for me to stand for what I believe in than to get another concert. I probably wouldn't feel like this if I were 20 years old," Peled acknowledged to JI. "But that's not the case. I think we can make a change, like we are ambassadors in a way."

At a January performance in Minneapolis, Peled was asked by the conductor of the Minnesota Sinfonia, the orchestra that accompanied him, to refrain from speaking about Israel, a request he disagreed with but ultimately chose to accept. So he played Hatikvah as usual, without saying anything first — a particularly jarring act since classical musicians usually announce the name of the piece they will be performing.

Jay Fishman, the Sinfonia's conductor, told JI that he asked Peled to refrain from discussing the war to avoid harming the Sinfonia's work with local public schools. "My job is to educate and do the very best for the kids that I possibly can, and I don't want things interfering with that," said Fishman. Had Peled spoken about the war, "that could trigger all kinds of reactions, many of which would not be good," said Fishman.

For artists and musicians who rely on live events to make a living, speaking out comes with an uncomfortable calculus: Will saying something pro-Israel mean a show gets shut down?

"They make their living playing shows and they are very careful not to offend fans," said Creative Community for Peace's Ingel. "I think they are making calculations based on that as well." Those calculations might look different for artists at different stages in their career, or for those who play large venues that will be unfazed by a group of 100 protestors versus those who book smaller venues where threats of boycott might present bigger challenges.

The Sinclair, a small venue in Cambridge, Mass., was almost forced to cancel the concert of Israeli artist Ishay Ribo in February after its staff collectively decided not to show up to work that day to boycott the Ribo show. Ribo, an Israel Defense Forces Veteran, has played several shows for IDF soldiers since October.

"They disclosed that they have a bunch of their employees who are refusing to staff the event, and this is a quote, these were the words, 'because it's against their personal beliefs,'" said Harvard Chabad Rabbi Hirschy Zarchi, who organized the concert. Once the venue found additional staff to work the concert, Zarchi said the protestors then called the supplier that was renting Ribo and his band's equipment, threatening them not to fill the order.

"We had a signed contract with the vendor. They needed to do the event. I mean, they couldn't legally get out of it," Zarchi said. Still, several days beforehand, the venue said they may not have the resources to pull it off; Zarchi began to consider alternate venues. Eventually, everything came together for two sold out shows, but the event went thousands of dollars over budget due to additional security and staffing costs.

On the day of the concert, several dozen protestors stood outside the Sinclair, shouting at concertgoers as they walked in that they were supporting genocide. Sinclair employees showed up with signs that read "Venue workers against genocide." But once attendees made it inside, they were treated to a joyful show that brought Jews together across the religious and ideological spectrum.

"The fact that it was targeted the way it was, in a strange way made it all the more meaningful, because it just created this contrast," said Zarchi. "It achieved exactly what it set out to do, to lift people's spirits."
Paula Gottesman gives $2 million matching grant to NJY Camps, a ‘seal of approval’ for the once scandal-rocked group

Organization’s CEO says the donation — that largest in its history — signals to other donors to come on board

By Judah Ari Gross

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Paula Gottesman pledged $2 million in matching funds to NJY Camps, giving the organization a “seal of approval” for other donors, the CEO of the group exclusively told eJewishPhilanthropy.

The donation from the Paula and Jerry Gottesman Family Supporting Foundation — no immediate relation of the other Jewish philanthropic Gottesman family — comes five years after NJY Camps’ entire board disbanded over its handling of yearslong sexual abuse by its former executive director, Len Robinson, against female employees. Since then, the organization has brought on a new board and new professional staff.

“Not only is it important in the dollar figure, which is a significant dollar figure for an organization that has a $16-$17 million budget. It also is a matching gift. And so therefore, it provides others with the opportunity to get out there and be part of this movement to build the thriving NJY camps for the next 100 years,” NJY Camps CEO Michael Schlank told eJ.

“For someone like Paula to not only give us that kind of gift, but [for it to be] a match, means that she very much feels — and the Metro-West Foundation very much feels — that we’re an organization that is deserving of that gift. And that speaks to the mission, to the people who work in this organization, both on the lay side and the professional side. And we’re really proud. It’s kind of a seal of approval,” he said, referring to the Jewish Community Foundation Of Greater MetroWest, N.J., which contains the Gottesman family foundation.

The $2 million pledge represents the largest single gift in the organization’s 104-year history. NJY Camps’ board President Stacie Friedman noted in a statement that the donation comes from “someone who is not an alum but rather a thoughtful philanthropist who recognizes the critical role that Jewish camp plays in building strong Jewish identity.”

The matching program, officially known as the Gottesman Gesher (Bridge) Campaign: Building a Bridge to the Next Century of Jewish Life, will work in two tiers: Gifts of more than $50,000 will be fully matched, one-to-one, while gifts smaller than that will be matched by the Gottesman fund with half the donated amount. “So it’s really incentivizing us to go out and get major gifts,” Will Eastman, NJY Camps’ chief development officer, told eJ.

“It’s all about helping us leverage this to get new supporters engaged,” Schlank said. “And I think it’s really just part of Paula’s plan that Jewish camps and Jewish day schools should be achievable and affordable and accessible to as many families as possible. This is just a continuation of that.”

In a statement, Gottesman called on additional donors to support NJY Camps, a member affiliate of the JCC Association of North America, which runs seven Jewish summer camps, as well as winter activities.

“Wein the Gottesman Family Foundation look forward to having others join us to support and enable our children to attend a thriving NJY Camps,” she wrote. “There, the campers will not only experience all the usual camp activities, but they will also be secure and proud of their Judaism, their people, Israel, and what they stand for. We are happy to invest in this program and believe that those who join us will find dividends beyond their expectations.”

According to Schlank, who joined NJY Camps in late 2020, the donation from the Gottesmans will go toward the organization itself, not toward infrastructure or individual programs.

“One of the things that we want to do is work towards a more thriving and nimble organization. So we’re going to look to do things like knock down our debt and put money towards more strategic and long-term thinking,” he said.

“It’s not about building a building. It’s not about another hadar oheil (dining hall) with someone’s name on it. It’s about how we are going to ensure that this organization’s trajectory continues... And as we are more financially nimble and capable, it allows us to do our work that much better.”

Schlank told eJ that the donation came with two conditions: “One was that we continue our mission of Zionist education. It’s very important to us as an organization, and she wants to reinforce that... And the second thing was she said, I’m not interested in naming anything anymore in my life. There’s already lots of schools and buildings and things [named for the Gottesman family]. Let’s not do that. Let’s make sure that you all are focused on doing the work. I don’t need anything named after me.”

But Schlank added: “I’m sure we’ll honor her in some way appropriately.”

MARCH 20, 2024
Meet Yael Lempert, the Jewish-American ambassador in Amman

Lempert’s role involves communicating America’s backing for Israel to a country with growing animosity towards the Jewish state

By Gabby Deutch

When Yael Lempert was sworn in as Washington’s new ambassador to Jordan in August, she arrived in a relatively calm Middle East.

Speaking in fluent Arabic in a video introducing herself to the Jordanian people, Lempert laid out an earnest set of diplomatic goals that, viewed in the context of the new post-Oct. 7 Middle East, appear almost comically outdated. Of course, she had no way of knowing that the vision she was conveying would be upended less than two months after she moved to Amman.

In the video, she described the U.S. and Jordan’s “shared priorities” as “supporting economic growth, strengthening water security and addressing security challenges in the region.” Lempert, who has earned a reputation as a “shawarma aficionado,” expressed her excitement to try Jordanian culinary delicacies like knafeh, a sweet filo dough pastry made with cheese, and mansaf, a popular rice dish with lamb and yogurt.

A career foreign service officer who has served in diplomatic posts across the Middle East, North Africa and Europe, Lempert presented herself in her Senate confirmation hearing as an optimist with a forward-looking vision for the Middle East. As the No. 2 official working on the Middle East at the State Department, she was Foggy Bottom’s biggest behind-the-scenes booster of regional integration and the Abraham Accords.

But that optimism has been pushed to the back burner, if not outright extinguished, since the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks in Israel. The war in Gaza has sparked a groundswell of anti-Israel sentiment across the Middle East, including in Jordan, where some 20% of residents are Palestinian.

The resulting hostility toward Israel, including from some of Jordan’s leaders, has put Washington in an uncomfortable position: navigating diplomatic ties with two neighboring nations who technically have a peace treaty and rely heavily on each other for security purposes, despite an undercurrent of public animosity toward Israel among Jordanians.

“She has to express the empathy and the anxiety of what the Palestinians are feeling [while] at the same time supporting the president’s position. You have to walk a fine line. The good news for her, she knows how to do that,” said former U.S. Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides, who worked closely with Lempert before stepping down from his post last summer.

That line has never been thinner than this month, as Hamas threatens additional violence during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which ends on April 9. Jordan maintains a special role overseeing Muslim access to the holy sites in Jerusalem. It’s a unique responsibility for the kingdom that requires discreet security cooperation with Israel, with the U.S. serving as something of a mediator. (Jordan’s foreign minister said last week that some Israeli restrictions on Palestinian worshippers could lead to an “explosion” in the region, although Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu overruled calls by some far-right members of his coalition to severely curtail the number of Muslims allowed to visit the Temple Mount.)

“There’s lots of different moving pieces here, and I think, quietly, we play a very important role in trying to ensure that this period passes with the least amount of attention, and trying to avoid any violence or conflict,” Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said of U.S. diplomacy around Ramadan. “Remember, the Oct. 7 attack was called the ‘Al-Aqsa flood.’ It was designed to try to trigger a broader array of attacks against Israel, and we’re going to see that again with Ramadan when Hamas is going to try again, and it will try to stoke tensions.”

The U.S.-Jordan relationship enjoys strong bipartisan support in Washington, even as Amman has publicly maintained a hard line against Israel that has frustrated some American lawmakers. But despite criticism from some conservatives, U.S. support for Jordan does not face any significant threats. Jordan receives nearly $1.5 billion a year in foreign assistance from the U.S., the result of a seven-year agreement signed by the two countries in 2022.

President Joe Biden called the partnership “strong” and “enduring” last month when Jordanian King Abdullah II visited the White House. (Lempert attended the king’s meetings in Washington.)

But that relationship has been strained in recent months. In October, on a whirlwind trip to the Middle East, Biden was scheduled to visit Amman after stopping in Tel Aviv — but Jordanian leaders canceled the meeting amid public outcry over an alleged Israeli attack on a Gaza hospital, which American and Israeli intelligence later determined had actually been the result of a misfired Palestinian Islamic Jihad rocket.

Lempert’s initial goal of increasing on-the-ground diplomacy with Jordanian
citizens became much harder after Oct. 7, with Lempert now viewed as the representative of a pro-Israel American government. Since then, she has worked alongside Jordanian officials to call for more humanitarian aid to enter Gaza and visited joint U.S.-Jordanian aid delegations. (The State Department declined to comment or to make Lempert available for an interview.)

This is not Lempert’s first time representing an unpopular American administration. As deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy in London to an ambassador appointed by former President Donald Trump, Lempert played a key diplomatic role at a time when the countries’ ties were fraying.

“That was Donald Trump who was extremely unpopular with the British. There was tremendous criticism of him and of many U.S. policies everyday in the British media and in Parliament,” said Elliott Abrams, who served in high-level foreign policy roles in the George W. Bush and Trump administrations. “That is actually a useful preparation for Amman because there will be in the Jordanian parliament and Jordanian media constant criticism of the U.S. government, under President Biden now, started under Trump and continuing under Biden, because the U.S. is viewed there as much too pro-Israel. So she’s used to dealing with this kind of thing.”

Lempert is the first Jewish-American ambassador to Jordan, a distinction that would have once been almost unthinkable; for decades, the State Department kept Jewish diplomats from serving in the Middle East as a matter of unwritten policy. That her status as the first Jewish person to serve in the role has not received any headlines is a sign of how far Washington has come. But that doesn’t mean Amman has followed.

“It’s tough enough being a female Jewish diplomat with an Israeli sounding name in Amman under any circumstances, and these have not been the most opportune circumstances throughout most of her tour,” said Satloff. “Yet, I think that she has done a highly professional job in an adverse situation and deserves lots of credit for dealing as expertly as she has over these last several months.”

Abrams pointed out that there is a “fair amount of antisemitism” in Jordanian society, but he speculated that that would not affect the Jordanian government’s dealings with Lempert.

“Officials understand that they cannot let that affect official relations, or the treatment of the ambassador — or if they do so, it’ll be at their own peril,” said Abrams. Lempert is known to have a close relationship with Secretary of State Tony Blinken.

Lempert grew up in Ithaca, N.Y., with close ties to the local Jewish community and to the Middle East. Her mother, a lawyer and civil liberties advocate in New York, spent more than a decade leading the now-defunct American-Israeli Civil Liberties Coalition, a human rights group focused on the West Bank. That connection — and Lempert’s work on policies criticizing Israeli settlements — has earned her the ire of some conservatives.

During the Obama administration, she was viewed as a key architect of the 2016 U.S.-Israel Memorandum of Understanding, which promised Israel $38 billion in U.S. foreign assistance over 10 years. She stayed on at the National Security Council in the early part of the Trump administration, earning the trust of senior Trump White House officials who were innately skeptical of career diplomats.

“She definitely, from a policy perspective, thinks more like an Obama administration type of person, perhaps a Biden administration type of person. But I found her to be very valuable because she was able to explain nuances and policies that we may not have agreed with or implemented,” said Jason Greenblatt, who served as Trump’s Middle East envoy. “Ultimately, once a decision was made, though, she would put all that aside and help.”

By the time the Trump administration’s Middle East team negotiated the Abraham Accords, Lempert was serving in London. But she became the biggest champion of normalization between Israel and Arab nations within the Biden administration.

Two years ago, she attended the Negev Summit, when Blinken brought the foreign ministers of Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Egypt together in Israel’s Negev desert. Afterward, Lempert spearheaded the creation of the “Negev Forum,” a more formal framework for strengthening ties between Israel and its Arab partners.

“You have no idea how hard this is, to get these countries to show up, to sit in a room, to talk. Unless you've done it before you have no idea how complicated this is. She's dogged in her determination,” said Nides.

Jordan had declined to participate in the Negev Forum, which has not held any public gatherings since Oct. 7, citing concerns about the Palestinians being left out of the Abraham Accords. Lempert said in her confirmation hearing last year that she hoped to change that. Nides told Jewish Insider that without Oct. 7, “100%” Lempert could have improved Israel-Jordan ties.

“It’s really just fantastic to see these relationships deepening,” Lempert told JI in 2022. “We feel very optimistic about what we’ll be able to do in this forum.”
The Jewish Federations of North America’s Center on Holocaust Survivor Care and Institute on Aging and Trauma will distribute $6.9 million in 2024 in grants to organizations that provide services to tens of thousands of Holocaust survivors and other older adults with a history of trauma, its managing director told eJewishPhilanthropy.

“This represents the largest amount the center has ever allocated in a single year, according to Shelley Rood Wernick, a granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, who leads the center.

“We’re very, very glad to be able to award these grants,” she told eJP. “It’s our largest allocation because: A, Demand is very high, and B, We have more money now than we’ve ever had before. Congress allocated $8.5 million towards this program in this last year, and so that — combined with the philanthropic fund — enabled us to have more money [to distribute].”

The $6.9 million in 2024 will be distributed to three main types of organizations: direct-service providers, approximately 30 of them, mostly Jewish family services; eight Jewish federations that will, in turn, issue their own grants to local organizations; and three national networks, the Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies, Habitat for Humanity International and KAVOD.

The grants range in size, from $40,000-$50,000 to hundreds of thousands of dollars, depending on the cost of the program and the number of people it helps, Rood Wernick said.

She noted that the past two years have been particularly difficult for many Holocaust survivors, making these allocations all the more needed.

“Current events right now are incredibly difficult for Holocaust survivors and other older people, especially in the Jewish community,” she said. “The war in Ukraine, the war in Israel, the attacks in Israel bring up memories for Holocaust survivors that are difficult and are causing people to be afraid, once again, for their own safety and afraid for the future of the Jewish community.”

Though philanthropic funds go toward the center, the bulk of the grant-making budget comes from federal funding, which makes it difficult to predict how much JFNA will be able to give in the future.

“Congress has to approve the grant, so it’s not guaranteed. And [the recipients] know it’s not guaranteed that the funding will be the same next year,” Rood Wernick said. “But wonderfully, Congress has never cut our program. Our funds have only increased as more members of Congress understand the need and they see the impact.”

The funding is specifically meant to support JFNA’s “person-centered, trauma-informed” (PCTI) approach to caring for Holocaust survivors and others who have experienced trauma, Rood Wernick said.

“When someone has a history of trauma, it’s very important that services be provided to them in a way that meets their needs and minimizes the triggers that could lead to reexperiencing it,” she said.

“So, for example, if you’re going to have a group meal program with Holocaust survivors, you wouldn’t want to have a buffet line because someone at the end of the line might be concerned that there wouldn’t be enough for them by the time they get to the front,” Rood Wernick said. “Instead, you’d have a completed meal, in which the to-go box is already on the table, so everyone knows there’s going to be an expectation there will be more than enough food and that you’re welcome to take it home. That’s the way to address the trauma of someone who may have been hungry in the past.”

Jewish Federations launched its Center on Holocaust Survivor Care and Institute on Aging and Trauma in 2015 with an initial $2.5 million grant from Administration for Community Living, a subdivision of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. With that funding, JFNA helped develop its PCTI method and train other agencies in providing PCTI care, including the Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies and the Blue Card Foundation.

“We’ve learned from Holocaust survivors,
If the summer of 2023 was one of growing optimism that the country at the center of the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia, was about to take its first steps towards normalizing ties with Israel, the world’s only Jewish state – and that the path to a blooming peace would be via Washington – today, it seems that any possibility of reaching such a historic agreement begins and ends in Gaza.

As the war in the Palestinian enclave enters its fifth month, with headlines focused on the dire humanitarian situation for more than 2 million Gazans, any chance of kickstarting diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel appears to be contingent on the creation of – or even just the affirmation of – a Palestinian state.

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy’s executive director, Robert Satloff, told Jewish Insider that while there is interest in Saudi Arabia for upgrading the strategic relationship with the U.S. – which Riyadh understands includes normalizing with Israel as a necessary precondition – “the Gaza conflict will require more from Israel in terms of a Palestinian component.”

Firstly, Satloff explained, Israel must compensate somewhat for the dismal way it is now being viewed in Saudi Arabia and in the broader Arab and Muslim public opinion, but also “extricate itself from post-Oct. 7 diplomatic isolation and to shift the political discourse at home from responsibility for the failures that led to Oct. 7 to the new opportunities of partnership with the region’s most influential Arab Muslim state.”

“Precisely what that higher ‘price’ is and whether the government of [Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu – or some variant – can meet it remains unclear,” he added.

“What is not unclear, however, is that none of this can proceed without an end to fighting in Gaza, and none of that can occur without the ‘temporary cease-fire’ of a hostage-prisoner release deal,” Satloff said, adding that this particular track of diplomacy is currently on hold, stymied by Hamas’ veto.

“In the meantime, the clock is ticking in terms of America’s own political calendar, as it is widely assumed that the U.S. Senate could not take up ratification of what would be the first mutual defense treaty in more than a half-century during the run-up to our presidential election,” he noted.

“Bottom line, in my view, is that the sand in the hourglass is running out to accomplish this historic achievement before our election,” Satloff added. “It is not impossible but more improbable with every passing day.”

“It is amazing to understand that the [normalization] deal is still on the table,” Ksenia Svetlova, CEO of Ropes, a regional organization for peace, economics and security, and a former member of Israel’s Knesset, told JI.

“If you think about it, one of the goals of Israel’s enemies, the pro-Iranian alliance, was break down the Abraham Accords and another was to take the Saudi deal off the table,” Svetlova, who is also a senior non-resident fellow at the Atlantic Council, said. “Yet the Abraham Accords are still here, hopefully for good, and the Saudi deal is not off the table.”

However, she added: “Israel will now

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Route to Saudi-Israel normalization now travels through Gaza

Despite attempts to derail the chances for normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, the deal is still on the table, but Israel will now have to make larger concessions towards the Palestinians

By Ruth Marks Eglash

If the summer of 2023 was one of growing optimism that the country at the center of the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia, was about to take its first steps towards normalizing ties with Israel, the world’s only Jewish state – and that the path to a blooming peace would be via Washington – today, it seems that any possibility of reaching such a historic agreement begins and ends in Gaza.

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However, she added: “Israel will now
have to do much more, not only to plan and commit but to take real steps in the direction” of creating a Palestinian state.

According to Svetlova, despite the optimism prior to the Oct. 7 terror attacks, there was still a feeling that it “was impossible to reach normalization without some movement on the Palestinian track.”

“The Saudis kept saying don’t mistake our goodwill for readiness to forget about the Palestinians and to move forward without any preconditions in this regard,” she said, adding that the “events of Oct. 7 and the war in Gaza have made this deal much more complicated.”

“Israel will definitely need to do more in order to satisfy the Saudis, who are the leaders of the Arab world, in regard to the future vision, not only in Gaza but also in the West Bank,” Svetlova explained. “And I am certain that there is absolutely no way that this government will be able to recognize this even on paper.”

“Just the slightest mention of a two-state solution is impossible given the extremist partners in Netanyahu’s coalition,” she said, adding “he has proven that he will not take any risks to hurt his coalition.”

“Even with the humanitarian aid, which is a consensus issue, Netanyahu is not able to confront [National Security Minister] Itamar Ben-Gvir, whose supporters are blocking the aid from going into Gaza through the Kerem Shalom crossing,” Svetlana continued. “It is impossible to imagine that in the current constellation, that the Israeli government will mull recognizing two states.”

As for the Saudis, Svetlova pointed out that recent polling shows that “the vast majority of Saudi society now rejects normalization with Israel.”

If in the past, Saudis were focused on the economy and sporting events, today around 90% of the youth are active on social media and following what is happening in Gaza very closely, she explained.

“The level of awareness is unbelievable,” said Svetlova. “It is something that they have not seen there for years and it is creating a different political reality.”

“They [the leaders in Saudi Arabia] will need to find a solution to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza – a real plan that has guarantees,” she said, adding that there are some indications that the Saudis understand there will be no fast solution coming from the Israeli side, and that in order to achieve success, a future arrangement for the Palestinians needs to be acceptable in Israel, too.

Reports through the summer of 2023 indicated that the Biden administration was keen to develop full diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia in an attempt to offset Chinese influence in the region and secure oil supplies against the backdrop of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine. Such a package, it was suggested, would also include pressure on the Saudis to normalize ties with Israel.

“It’s important to note, that the Saudi position is that it is still willing to normalize relations with Israel, but only once the conditions are right or suitable,” Aziz Alghashian, a fellow at Project Sepad, a think tank at the University of Lancaster in the U.K., who researches Saudi foreign policy on Israel, told JI.

In return, Saudi Arabia was demanding a mutual defense pact from the U.S. and an option to enrich uranium for civilian, and possibly military, purposes. There was also some talk that the kingdom, which stands at the center of the Muslim world due to the holy sites of Mecca and Medina, would call upon Israel to make some concessions to the Palestinians, although what, exactly, was not specified.

Over the past few months, there have been some hints that the Saudis would still consider reaching an arrangement with Israel – in January, Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the U.K. commented that Riyadh was “absolutely” still interested in normalizing with Jerusalem – an interest that is facing challenges as the war continues in Gaza and the Israeli government appears reluctant to chart a path towards a two-state solution with the Palestinians.

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“In fact, this has always been the Saudi position since the mid-1990s,” he continued, adding “what has changed is that there is an American dimension now that the Saudis would like, in addition to a Palestinian element that is needed to legitimize any settlement of normalization with Israel – this arguably complicates the road to normalization by adding more variables that need to be aligned.”

“Against the current backdrop of death and destruction, the context for any normalization is very distant,” Alghashian continued. “The Saudis need to have a Palestinian element, and currently, the statements regarding the refusal of a two-state solution from the Netanyahu government, and the ongoing military campaign in Gaza, which Saudi refuses to accept as self-defense, makes steps towards normalization more difficult.”

Alghashian explained that the current government, which has moved forward with plans to expand settlements in the West Bank, “has made it even more difficult.”

“The Saudis need to see a partner in Israel that will not make normalization harder by being provocative, and one that is willing to work with Palestinians,” he said. “Netanyahu seems to think that he can have his cake and eat it when it comes to normalization with the Saudis... In other words, he wants to normalize ties with Saudi for free, and the Saudis know their price is bigger than that.”

Despite the excitement over the potential for normalization only six months ago, Alghashian pointed out that the “excitement overlooked the other half of Saudi official discourse that has been warning of a dangerous situation on the horizon.”

“The Saudi considers this tragic war, with all its Palestinian and Israeli casualties, as a stark reminder of why there needs to be a political horizon that safeguards not only Palestinians, Israelis, but all the region from more conflict,” he said. “The Saudi will need to see more measures taken regarding a
New book highlights America’s ‘Family Unfriendly’ culture — in contrast with Israel

Tim Carney dedicates a chapter of his book to investigating how Israel came to be the most fertile of the world’s wealthy countries: ‘Culture is the most important thing’

By Lahav Harkov

While Tim Carney was working on his new book, Family Unfriendly: How Our Culture Made Raising Kids Much Harder Than It Needs to Be, he joined a Catholic pilgrimage to Israel and found himself in the country with the highest fertility rate of the world’s wealthiest nations.

Israel has a birthrate of three children per woman, according to the most recent data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. That’s almost twice the OECD average of 1.58 and significantly more than second-place country Saudi Arabia at 2.43 or the U.S., in 18th place with a birth rate of 1.66.

Carney, an American Enterprise Institute fellow and Washington Examiner columnist — but perhaps most importantly to his latest project, a father of six — extended his visit to Israel, seeking to find out Israel’s secret, and how it can be replicated. He spoke with secular parents at a public playground in Tel Aviv and Orthodox parents on the streets of Jerusalem about why they had kids and how they’re raising them.

As anyone sitting next to a parent on an El Al flight may have observed, it is perfectly natural for an Israeli to hand his or her baby to a stranger so he or she can use the restroom. It’s also quite common in Israel for a fourth grader to walk home from school without an adult and pick up a younger sibling from preschool on the way.

It’s phenomena like these that helped Carney reach his conclusion that culture, rather than policy or even religion, is behind Israel’s exceptional fecundity, and Carney decided to dedicate a chapter of his book to the Jewish state.

He spoke with Jewish Insider this month about his new book and his findings.
**Jewish Insider:** What did you find so interesting about Israel that you decided to write a whole chapter about it?

**Tim Carney:** No OECD country even competes with Israel on people having babies. It's even more interesting when someone showed me data on Israel that broke it down by [population] category, and even for secular Jews it's about 2.0 – more than the U.S. – so you couldn't chalk up the higher birth rate to religious teaching or something specific about the more Orthodox [Jews].

**Ji:** What did you learn on the visit?

**TC:** I got to see the culture a little bit on my pilgrimage. I grew up in New York, and the only people who compete with New Yorkers in willingness to offer their opinions are the people of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem!

I interviewed people who identified as totally secular but many had three kids. One guy told me “God has nothing to do with our family planning.” One Orthodox guy in Jerusalem said, “No, it's just about religion,” and we had this back and forth and he said, “OK, it starts with religion.” That helped me see it.

The broader image I came up with is a garden where the central tree is religion. God's first commandment is “be fruitful and multiply.” But there are other trees. One person talked about the tribe, another about the preservation of the Jewish people throughout history and from geopolitical threats.

These three trees create a garden and a family ecosystem, where, even if you don’t eat from all three of these trees, you still live in a family-friendly environment.

**Ji:** So those are reasons for people to want to have more children, but research shows a gap between how many children women want and how many they actually have. What makes Israelis take that extra step?

**TC:** I used to live in Silver Spring, Md., right next door to Kemp Mill [where there’s a large Orthodox Jewish community]. One year, as part of my reporting, I went to the Purim festival at one of the big synagogues there. This one man said to me, in trying to explain how pro-family he thought Israel was, that the bus drivers in Israel have a real affection for little kids. It's a beautiful image that everybody out there is looking out for your kids and trying to help you.

I'm a fellow at AEI, where we're doing public policy research. A lot of my friends try to make economic policy about what is going on. I think sometimes culture, which is less measurable, really needs to be considered. Israel really drives home that culture is the most important thing.

**Ji:** How is that culture expressed?

**TC:** About 70% of Israeli parents reported having help from their own parents in raising kids. That is incredibly valuable, and it's half that rate in Europe. The U.S. is closer.

There's a general free-range-ness of Israeli kids. There was one guy I spoke to who was not fluent in English and was somewhat indelicate in saying “here you don't need to raise your own children.”...I saw sixth graders Rollerblading around Dizengoff Square on a Sunday night without needing parental supervision. Parents were bringing kids to a restaurant that would be too nice for kids in the U.S. I spoke at a conference recently and said that there would be many kids at this conference if it were in Israel.

There's more of an expectation that you'll help some stranger's kid. One guy told me that, when crossing the street, a 6-year-old will wait for the next adult to help him. That is something that doesn't happen in the U.S.; if you try to help a strange 6-year-old, someone might think you're a creep.

**Ji:** The expectation that strangers in Israel will help you with your kid — something that I can definitely attest to as an Israeli mom — seems like an indicator of a high-trust society. Do you think trust correlates with family-friendliness?

**TC:** The U.S. is steadily becoming a lower and lower trust society, and that has massive negative consequences. A great sign of a healthy society is if kids’ bikes are scattered on the front lawns. I saw that even in the Old City of Jerusalem; there'd be a little courtyard with little kids’ bikes not locked up.

High trust vs. low trust society is something that has its own momentum. I think we are slipping in the opposite direction...It would be incredibly complicated to tease out the causes of it.

Being a higher-trust society makes it much easier to raise children.

**Ji:** Are there Israeli government policies that you think the U.S. should adopt to be friendlier to families?

**TC:** The OECD tracks the percentage of GDP that goes to welfare spending and specifically on parents and children, and Israel is in the middle of the pack on both of those. A lot of countries that spend a lot more on that stuff don’t have higher birth rates and their birth rates have fallen.

It could be that Israel picks the right policies and spends more efficiently, but the way I look at it is that the difference has to do with culture. Certain policies will nudge culture in a more family-friendly direction, and those will be the ones that matter.

What doesn't help is just subsidizing childcare. It certainly doesn't help married women have more children. It's just a subsidy for work. Giving people large child allowances or tax credits definitely has some positive effect, though it's super expensive...

My theory is that removing uncertainty from the lives of would-be parents is one of the most important things that policy can do — knowing that being pregnant and having a baby won't make you poor, [Governments] don't have to cover the whole thing, but you can estimate how much it costs. We have zero transparency on any [health-care costs]. It's even worse for parents. When my wife gave birth there was an out-of-network anesthesiologist on duty, and they hit us with a $10,000 bill. That uncertainty is built into the system.

We should make birth free as a policy. That could be a relatively cheap way of removing the uncertainty.

Another policy to make the U.S. more family friendly would have to do with sidewalks and walkability and bike-ability. Anything to make it easier for parents to be more free-range and allow kids to independently play. At a lot of schools now, it's a special exception if your kid walks. You have to fill out forms.

**Ji:** It used to be fairly common for American kids to walk to school on their own — before either of us was in school,
but you see it in books and movies from the mid-20th century. Ramona Quimby walked to kindergarten. What changed?

TC: It’s the way suburbs were built. Cars got cheaper, and they represented freedom. We’re a big country with tons of room and living further and further out became more desirable.

Stranger danger in the U.S. really kicked into gear when I was a kid. There were high-profile abductions that took place. The idea got implanted that there is a kidnapper around every corner in the late ’80s. I think that really discouraged kids from walking.

Back in the 1960s, kids were four times more likely to walk to school than they were 10 years ago. It’s never been the case that most American kids walked or biked, but it was 40% then and 10% around 10 years ago.

JI: If the argument is that government is not the main driver of family friendliness, what should parents or communities do?

TC: Embrace the fact that child-rearing is a communal undertaking. Don’t be afraid to impose your kids on other people by sending them over, and communicate clearly that other people can discipline or correct your kids. So many people my age remember being yelled at by another mom on a porch, and that wasn’t considered being a busybody. We need to set that norm — to borrow a phrase, “it takes a village.” Say to people, “my kid is running around the neighborhood; this is why I think it’s safe. Your kid can join. The more the merrier.”

JI: Do you think religion makes a difference?

TC: America has lots of family-friendly subcultures. Kemp Mill is one in my book. There are also Mormon circles in Utah and Idaho.

It’s not broadly the case in Catholic circles, but we run in specific Catholic circles where we have six kids and we have friends with six or eight. We are more family-centered. Our weekend is more likely to have a barbecue cookout where the kids run wild.

Mormon institutions like Brigham Young University not only accommodate parents, they declare that they will accommodate parents. It is very common to have kids while an undergrad at BYU. Lots of religious communities explicitly go out of their way.

It’s not so surprising that religious communities where members regularly attend services have significantly more kids than non-religious communities, above the replacement rate [of two children]. Catholics who go to church every Sunday are at three kids; Catholics who don’t are closer to the national average. Belonging to a religious congregation gives you a sense of belonging and connects you to people. They’re there when you’re in trouble. It has more to do with that than religion.

JI: Do you think there needs to be pushback against the increasingly common deferral of marriage and having children?

TC: The delay in marriage is the major cause of the reduction of birth rates. If somebody wants three kids, gets married at 30 and waits a couple of years, there’s a higher likelihood that biology won’t cooperate with their plans. That’s a major thing.

I think our dating and mating culture in the U.S. is totally broken, even more than our career-mindedness. The dating apps fit into a broader cultural change that makes everybody totally dysfunctional at getting together. People become perfectionists because of apps and afraid to ask someone out in person because they haven’t gotten double secret consent.

I’m better at diagnosing problems than finding solutions, but [we need to] normalize dating friends of friends and just pound the point that nobody is ever ready to have kids. There’s no perfect time, so anytime is as good as any other. ♦