Nearly a decade ago, student activists met for the annual National Students for Justice in Palestine conference. Titled “From Campus to Community: Building a Vision for the Future,” the 2015 gathering focused on strategies for moving anti-Israel activity off into the broader community. Efforts to mobilize activists to challenge their municipalities to pass anti-Israel legislation faced significant hurdles for years, but exploded in the wake of the Oct. 7 terror attacks.

Since Oct. 7, some 70 U.S. cities, including Chicago and Seattle, have passed resolutions on the Israel-Hamas war with most calling for the Biden administration to broker a cease-fire. At least 48 cities have passed symbolic resolutions calling for a halt in the war.

The grassroots efforts to tackle anti-Israel activity as it spreads to communities

By Haley Cohen

Mika Efros doesn’t consider herself an activist. But when her “small, close-knit” Southern California town of Claremont became the center of a proposed cease-fire resolution — which called on Israel to immediately end its war in Gaza without defeating Hamas — the mother of two “had 10 days to react and do something.”

“It started with a group chat [among neighbors] with everyone who was Jewish,” Efros recalled in an interview with Jewish Insider. “We basically said let’s meet up and strategize... We just said we need to get together and figure this out because now it’s coming to our backyard,” she said of the suburban Los Angeles city, which is home to seven colleges and graduate schools – Pomona College, Claremont Graduate University, Scripps College, Claremont McKenna College, Harvey Mudd College, Pitzer College and Keck Graduate Institute.

On Feb. 27, the Claremont City Council joined a fast-growing group of local legislative bodies to vote on a cease-fire resolution in the Israel-Hamas war. The vote was actually on two resolutions: one that called for neutrality on social and political issues not local to Claremont, and another that called for a cease-fire in Gaza. The first resolution passed, negating a vote on the second, and local residents chalk up the victory to a grassroots effort led by about 20 previously politically disengaged Jews who took a stand against more than 300 college students, SJP members and local community members. Their winning campaign slogan was “Claremont: Stay local.”
As cease-fire resolutions continue to jump from college campuses to local city councils, a long-term SJP goal, Efros said that other towns could use Claremont as a model for what “worked” in the deep blue town to combat the resolution. “None of us knew what to do,” she said of the small group of activists, which consisted of a variety of residents, from stay-at-home moms to a rabbi to non-Jewish spouses of Jewish community members.

Efros said “lobbying” is too strong of a word to describe the group’s efforts. Rather, she detailed the period of time between the idea of a cease-fire resolution initially being introduced by several attendees during a mid-Feb meeting, up until the vote, as consisting of “a lot of letters written to the city council members and phone calls to them.”

She called communication with the council members “cordial.” “Some responded to phone calls and were open to understanding why the local community was opposed to the cease-fire being voted on.”

“We found that the best thing is to have a strategy that does not get into details of who is wrong, who is right... but rather formulate an adult approach saying that this is not a local issue,” Mika Efros said. “Claremont is a small, close-knit community and we don't want to bring matters outside of the juxtaposition of City Council into the meeting, that was our strategy.”

The meeting, which lasted nearly seven hours, concluded with a unanimous vote by council members in favor of the first resolution, effectively ruling out the possibility of their voting on the second.

The resolutions, whether or not they pass, often embolden antisemitic rhetoric around town, as seen in the San Francisco Bay Area, which has been the center of at least a couple dozen community cease-fire resolutions since Oct. 7.

Tyler Gregory, CEO of the Jewish Community Relations Council Bay Area, told JI that a unanimous vote by Oakland City Council to pass a cease-fire resolution in November, which called on Congress to demand an end to the war in Gaza, is the most prominent example of how the resolutions have “led to a decay.”

“Our approach is always asking if we can defeat it,” said Tyler Gregory, CEO of the Jewish Community Relations Council Bay Area. “If we can defeat it, we work with the community, meet with legislators and try to have them vote it down. Sometimes that is successful. But realistically, we try to amend the language that's there, [such as] including that all the hostages will be released or a condemnation of Hamas and the language that Hamas needs to be removed.”

The cease-fire resolution, which did not condemn Hamas, “led to mass antisemitic graffiti around town,” Gregory said, adding that soon after, on Dec. 6, the local teachers' union “felt emboldened to support a teach-in for Palestine.”

“Ultimately [it led to] the menorah being desecrated and thrown into Lake Merritt,” Gregory continued.

JCRC, along with several other Jewish groups, have offered guidance to community members on how to fight the resolutions. The approach is different in each community, depending on the strength of relationships with council members, political views and the type of resolution.

“Our approach is always asking if we can defeat it,” Gregory said. “If we can defeat it, we work with the community, meet with legislators and try to have them vote it down. Sometimes that is successful. But realistically, we try to amend the language that’s there, [such as] including that all the hostages will be released or a condemnation of Hamas and the language that Hamas needs to be removed.”

“Sometimes we're most successful in going from a bad resolution to one that we can live with,” Gregory continued. “That's a second choice approach. Even if it is voted to approve, the community then has an understanding of who isn’t willing to condemn Hamas. [It tells us] who our friends are.”

Gregory added that understanding the intention behind each resolution, and whether there are antisemitic undertones, is crucial. He pointed to a resolution in Richmond, just outside of Berkeley, “where Israel was declared to be an apartheid, genocidal state.”

“It was openly antisemitic, in addition to their call for a cease-fire,” he said, adding that others are “more benign, saying we want people dying to stop.”

“We've seen many highly problematic cease-fire resolutions, which have downplayed or even failed to mention...
Hamas atrocities while placing the entire onus of this current war on Israel,” Anti-Defamation League CEO Jonathan Greenblatt, said in a statement. “Some local hearings on these resolutions have featured shocking antisemitic rhetoric directed at Jews and Zionists, creating a hostile environment surrounding these actions for those in attendance.

“So when we are thinking about how we address these issues—we are angry wherever they happen, but we also need to stop and ask whether these resolutions are brought forward in good faith or not,” Gregory said.

He called the rise of widespread attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict throughout the Bay Area “unprecedented.”

“We’ve gone from the most liberal cities here, like Oakland, Berkeley and San Francisco to the suburbs of Palo Alto and Silicon Valley that have never seen any kind of fraught attention around the conflict. The community is waking up to this as a result.”

The Anti-Defamation League issued local guidance on cease-fire resolutions last month.

“We’ve seen many highly problematic cease-fire resolutions, which have downplayed or even failed to mention Hamas atrocities while placing the entire onus of this current war on Israel,” the group’s CEO, Jonathan Greenblatt, said in a statement.

“Some local hearings on these resolutions have featured shocking antisemitic rhetoric directed at Jews and Zionists, creating a hostile environment surrounding these actions for those in attendance. We continue to urge city councils, legislatures, and other bodies to consider more balanced measures that include the release of all the hostages, humanitarian assistance for civilians of Gaza and an end to the threat posed by the terrorist group Hamas. The reality is this war could end today were Hamas to release all hostages, disarm and disband and end its rule of Gaza.”

Jewish Federations of North America receives inquiries from federations nationwide dealing with local cease-fire resolutions “what seems like on the hour, every hour,” Evan Bernstein, the group’s vice president for community relations, told JI. “Sometimes it’s multiple times,” he continued. “They’ll battle a resolution and get a win and the other side keeps coming back and eventually the city council will approve the resolution. It’s been a real strain on the Jewish community and federation leadership. We’ve had some real wins and some where things are really stacked against us.”

Bernstein said that JFNA has worked on how to handle the resolutions with close to 80 federations around the U.S. since mid-October. “[We help with] language around it, what to say if you’re testifying, how to work on op-eds, how to work on private conversations with city council,” he said, noting that many federations are experienced in dealing with state and federal elected officials, but have not focused on city council before.

“This has never been an issue the way it is now,” Bernstein continued. “People saw the opportunity and now federations are having to pivot and not only play defense but also offense.”

SJP-led anti-Israel activity has infiltrated college campuses since Oct. 7— including on campuses without much history of anti-Israel political activism. But SJP’s stated long-term goal — one that predates Oct. 7 — was always to go a step further: for cease-fire resolutions to take over the wider community.

In the years before the Oct. 7 attack, there have been sporadic efforts to pass anti-Israel measures. The efforts would usually pop up during previous conflicts between Israel and Hamas.

Several of the efforts were related to police department trainings and summits involving travel to Israel and learning from Israeli law enforcement’s experience in preventing terrorist attacks. In 2018, a petition in Durham, N.C., asked the City Council to forbid the local police from attending programs hosted by Israeli law enforcement to learn how to stop terrorist attacks and mass shootings in their city — even though Durham didn’t send its cops to Israel. The City Council passed the resolution, a decision that “felt like a punch in the gut” for pro-Israel residents of Durham. In an op-ed at the time, a group of rabbis wrote, the “statement singling out partnerships with Israel for prohibition, but no other country in the world, was so distressing for many Jews in our community … the vote felt like a punch in the gut.”

Several of the communities that passed cease-fire resolutions last month, from Amherst, Mass., to Durham, N.H., are college towns.

“What happens on campus does not stay on campus,” Jacob Baime, CEO of Israel on Campus Coalition, told JI. “The very same anti-Israel organizers bring BDS to campus and cease-fire resolutions to city councils. Our adversaries perceive and operate in a unified battlespace, sharing strategy, tactics and resources across domains of American society. The anti-Israel campaign in America is not grassroots. It is a top-down professional political operation.”

ICC has been tracking the trend as far back as 2015. In its annual report that year, the group wrote, “SJP chapters and members spent a significant amount of effort building relationships with community members.”

In February, California’s Riverside City Council was set to consider a cease-fire resolution. The resolution did not call for the release of hostages remaining in Gaza. Logan Fraigun, a University of California, Riverside third-year political science major, met with the student government and City Council to combat the resolution.

After five hours of speeches, the resolution failed. “A lot of students from my campus were involved in the City Council vote,” he said, adding that the community resolution had ripple effects on the university, miles away from city hall, even more so than in the community itself.

“I don’t really think it’s a big issue in Riverside, mostly because people don’t really care about the issue,” he said. “But on campus, I don’t feel safe doing Jewish activities or hosting Jewish events.”

“There have been incidents where we try to host pro-Israel events and SJP will try to shut us down,” Fraigun continued. “They’ve made it a non-open environment.”
Hadassah hospital director: Philanthropy is for fostering excellence, not paying salaries — that’s the government’s job

In wide-ranging interview, Dr. Yoram Weiss, discusses the challenges facing his medical network in general and post-Oct. 7, as well as his plans to expand to Netivot

By Judah Ari Gross

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

In the aftermath of the Oct. 7 terror attacks, Dr. Yoram Weiss, the director-general of the Hadassah Medical Organization, had two priorities: Construct an underground hospital at its Mount Scopus campus in case the Hezbollah terror group joined the fighting with its massive arsenal of long-range missiles; and open the Gandel Rehabilitation Center, which was still under construction, in order to provide treatment as quickly as possible to the thousands of people wounded in the initial Oct. 7 attacks and the war.

In January, Weiss led eJewishPhilanthropy on a tour of both the fortified subterranean hospital, which has not yet been needed, and the completed parts of the Gandel Rehabilitation Center, which had just started receiving patients.

Last month, eJP again met up with Weiss in his office at Hadassah’s Ein Kerem campus for a wide-ranging conversation about the challenges facing the hospital system, his organization’s plans for the future and the role that philanthropy should and shouldn’t play in addressing both of them.

The interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

Judah Ari Gross: The last time we met, we ran out of time as we started speaking about the role that philanthropy should play in Israel’s healthcare system.

Yoram Weiss: In my view, philanthropy is only to foster excellence. Philanthropy should not come instead of the government. That’s my opinion. The government has its responsibility for its citizens and needs to take care of them. Only in very, very extreme cases, philanthropy can come in: when someone does not have universal health care, to help cover for this. For example, with refugees. But in all other cases, it’s the state that has the responsibility.

Philanthropy allows us to plan the future of Hadassah not as a community hospital, but as a tertiary or quaternary care hospital. And what do I mean by quaternary? It’s when I provide services that are specialized, not only for Israel, but outside of Israel as well. When people will come to Hadassah to get services that they can’t get in other countries in the world, because only we’re providing them. And this requires both the infrastructure and the equipment to do that.

Philanthropy is also helping us where, unfortunately, the government is not very good at. And this is developing the infrastructure. Without the infrastructure, it’s impossible to develop these very advanced or very innovative services that we would like to develop.

Philanthropy can be used to improve the clinical research, the basic science and also the advanced clinical treatments. I do not think that philanthropy should be used for cleaning the floors or for hiring physicians or nurses. It’s the responsibility of the state to provide us with the funding to do that.

It’s obvious that sometimes philanthropy steps in where, unfortunately, the government can’t do that. In Israel, because of the high expenses on defense, which now actually will go even higher, we have always had a problem with providing very good health care to our patients. We always had a problem with infrastructure because the government never put in money to develop this, which supports these very advanced services that we’re providing in Israel. And here, philanthropy stepped in, and you see that all over Israel.

You see it at Hadassah: All our buildings are basically thanks to donors from all over the world — and from Israel — but especially from the United States. We are an American organization, and that’s why you have the American flag here in the room [motioning to the corner of his office where an Israeli flag, Hadassah flag and American flag stood], because we are here thanks to an American organization.

What happened after Oct. 7 is that, obviously, new issues came up, which before the war were not so important and which are also very expensive. Namely, how to create an environment that is safe for the patients. In order to do that, because of the concerns we have with missile attacks, we had to invest, first of all, in underground infrastructure, which we’re doing, and also creating new areas for shelters in both our campuses.

JAG: Beyond those immediate security needs, what are some of the other areas where you see philanthropy playing a significant role in Hadassah in the foreseeable future?

YW: First of all, we’re finishing two projects. One is the Gandel Rehabilitation Center [at Hadassah’s Mount Scopus campus], we’re finishing that, and there’s the Round Building [at its Ein Kerem campus], which we are finishing to renovate — also thanks to donors from all over the world. We’re also starting to discuss another project in oncology.

JAG: I believe last time we spoke, you mentioned a new project in Netivot.
YW: Yes. About a year before the war started, we identified Netivot [as a potential location for a new branch]. And the reason is that medicine is changing, in general. In the past, the patient had to drive to the hospital for care. Today, you can bring [that care] really close to the home of the patient. For this reason, about a year ago we opened an extension of Hadassah in Beit Shemesh. It's a clinic that is serving tertiary care services, bringing these services to the community. And this is exactly the same model that we decided to do in Netivot because we realized at that time that this entire area of Netivot, Sderot, and the kibbutzim and villages around it are basically 35 to 40 minutes from Soroka [hospital in Beersheva] or Barzilai [medical center in Ashkelon].

Even before the war, we had already received permission to have a CT and MRI there, and we started building the clinic. So we're continuing to do that.

What we're also trying to do now is to involve the faculty of medicine [at Hebrew University], which Hadassah owns 50% of, together with the Hebrew University. We are also looking at opening an extension of the School of Medicine in this area, together with Sapir College [in Sderot]. Some of the education could be provided in Netivot. We're thinking of a premed program or maybe a nursing school. We're still looking together with the Tekuma Authority [the government body responsible for Gaza border reconstruction] to see what are the best services to put there. And we're looking maybe to open a school for physician assistants over there.

JAG: I thought Israel didn't have physicians' assistants.

YW: Yes, in the States, it's very common. But we don't yet have it in Israel. We're trying to start it in Israel, and we want to put a school for that. I'm a big promoter of that. We have actually already submitted a request to the Israeli Council for Higher Education.

The idea is to have an advanced clinic in Netivot and, together with Hebrew University, branches of the School of Medicine, and then at the end creating a startup community as we have here in Jerusalem. Because here in this campus, we have more than 700 people who work in startups, who are not part of the hospital. We provide them with the infrastructure, and they use it to do their biomedical or medical research. And we have an accelerator, which was established together with IBM, where we have already more than 25 companies that graduated in six cohorts. And they brought in, after their initial phase, more than $80 million in investments.

JAG: And where do things stand in terms of the timeline of the Netivot clinic?

YW: We hope that by the end of this year, the clinic will be ready, that by Jan. 1, 2025, we'll start caring for patients. 2025.

JAG: And in terms of the medical school programs?

YW: I don't know that yet. It's too early. We're just starting to work on it.

JAG: And what are some of the challenges facing Hadassah today?

YW: You need to have the infrastructure, technology and the people. The people are the most important, and the real challenge is how to keep good people here. You can quote me: 'Jerusalem is becoming a city where it's very, very difficult to convince people to live here.' Because unfortunately people like you with knitted kippot, or [secular] people like me — they don't want to stay here in Jerusalem. I don't need to tell you about the complexity and how diverse the population here is.

I think the state needs to put effort into attracting to Jerusalem non-religious groups or [national-religious] knitted kippah-wearers. And you can write it down. I say it to the government, I say it to the municipality.

I should say I have full respect for the Haredi community. Don't misunderstand me. I consider them my best friends. It's important that [that] be written too. We embrace them. I appreciate them. Part of the effort we had in preparing the underground hospital in the Mount Scopus campus was thanks to the Haredi community that came and helped us. So I have full respect for them.

JAG: From what I understand, salaries are also a major struggle in keeping people at Hadassah.

YW: Salaries are a problem because what's happening today in Israel is that the health management organizations, the kupot holim, have very significantly increased the amount of money that they pay physicians who work in their clinics. To the point that today a physician that is working in a clinic can make three times more money compared to what he earns in the hospital. And they don't have to be on call. And they don't have to have shifts on Friday and Saturdays. This is creating huge pressure on the system. People that have been trained in one or two fellowships, at a certain point — because of money — tell us, ‘Thank you, we're going to go work in the community now. Easier life, better money.' And this is a major, major stumbling block for the hospitals.

JAG: So how are you getting around that stumbling block?

YW: It's difficult. Very difficult.

JAG: And that's not something that you want to turn to philanthropy to help you with?

YW: No way! This is the responsibility of the government. I'm fighting with the government about it. Philanthropists should not cover these issues. This is not for philanthropy. This is the responsibility of the government, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Finance.

JAG: In terms of the people and in terms of Hadassah's stated mission of promoting peace, I know that in a number of hospitals, especially in the beginning of the war, things were tense among the staff and between the Arabic-speaking staff and patients and their families. How has that been for Hadassah?

YW: I've been here at Hadassah for 34 years. I was the director of the surgical intensive care during the Second Intifada. We have seen times of tensions as we've seen today.

We have Arab patients, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Haredi Jews, secular Jews, all of them being here together, working together in full collaboration. Is it a difficult period? Yes, it's a difficult period. But I think that what transpires is that our mission here in this hospital is to save lives, and I think anyone who works here understands that.

I just had a patient from Tel Aviv who was discharged yesterday, and she was here with her husband who's a very wealthy businessman. And yesterday when I came into his room before they left — they were here for a week — he said: 'You know, Yoram, after being here for a week at Hadassah, I understand maybe there's a chance for
peace.’

Really, the way people work together, the respect that they have to each other... I always say: Keep politics out of the building.

If there's someone working at Hadassah, they can say whatever they want outside but not on the social networks. We won't tolerate it because social networks are very inflammatory. And I'm saying always to people, you have the right to have your own opinions. But when you're here at Hadassah, no politics.

I don't want to dwell too much on this because, like you said, it's a sensitive period and I don't think too much is gained by focusing on the places where there are issues. But I want to tell you, we have had quite a few soldiers coming through here, and I had not one soldier complain about the Arab staff.

APRIL 3, 2024

How Gaza hospitals have become the front line in Israel’s war against Hamas

A captured Hamas commander told Israeli officials that the group uses hospitals "because of the large population there and also because there is water, electricity and a lot of action... and because a hospital cannot be touched in war.'

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Weapons caches, heavy artillery and hundreds of armed terrorists, including some of Israel's most wanted – these were just some of what the IDF uncovered during an intense two-week operation inside Gaza's largest medical complex, Al-Shifa Hospital. Rear Adm. Danial Hagari, the IDF spokesman, said this week as the army prepared to withdraw from the area.

Calling it "a significant blow for Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad," Hagari told journalists in a special briefing that more than 200 terrorists had been killed during the fighting and a further 900 arrested. Among those killed or captured by Israel were Marwan Issa, the deputy commander of Hamas' military wing, and Ra'ad Thabet, head of Hamas' recruitment and acquisition efforts.

Civilians, patients and medical staff in the hospital were evacuated to a nearby facility, he said, highlighting that no civilians were killed during the fighting and a further 900 arrested.

Throughout the past six months, the IDF has shared information on military operations in hospitals such as Al-Amal in Khan Younis, Al-Nasser in Gaza City, Al-Aqsa Martyrs in Deir al-Balah and the Al-Ahli Hospital in central Gaza. Al-Ahli became a focus early on in the war when an errant Palestinian Islamic Jihad rocket hit the hospital's parking lot, killing civilians. At the time, Hamas – and the international media – were quick to accuse Israel of attacking the facility.

“Since it took over Gaza, Hamas has been using the population as human shields and civilian facilities as military centers to hide their missiles, launchers and rockets,” Nitsana Darshan-Leitner, president of Shurat HaDin, the Israel Law Center, told Jewish Insider.

The working assumption of the terror groups in Gaza is that the Israeli military will not enter a medical facility because it would contravene international humanitarian
law, which dictates that hospitals, medical units and ambulances not be considered legitimate military targets.

However, legal and medical experts point out that the law does not categorically prohibit such attacks and that under some circumstances hospitals can lose their special protection, especially if they are being used for acts considered "harmful to the enemy."

"Since it took over Gaza, Hamas has been using the population as human shields and civilian facilities as military centers to hide their missiles, launchers and rockets," Nitsana Darshan-Leitner, president of Shurat HaDin, the Israel Law Center, told Jewish Insider.

She explained that while there was clear evidence of this from previous rounds of fighting in Gaza, now it was on full display because Israel is battling much deeper inside the territory.

"This time, Israel has discovered the unbelievable scope that Hamas has been using civilian facilities, not only kindergartens and schools, which we already knew about from previous rounds of fighting, but also mosques and specifically hospitals," Darshan-Leitner said.

"Why are they using hospitals?" she asked. "Because mosques, schools and kindergartens can be easily evacuated but in hospitals there are patients in life-threatening situations or hooked up to machines and you can't simply clear them out."

Also, Darshan-Leitner emphasized, "Hamas feels more protected in hospitals and that is why they are using them for everything relating to their military operation."

International humanitarian law dictates that any place used for military purposes is a legitimate target, when it comes to hospitals, the attacking force must make greater efforts to refrain from harming civilians.

In his briefing on Monday, Hagari said that during Israel’s last controversial operation in Al-Shifa last November, the army gave those inside more than a week to leave the complex. This, he said, enabled many militants to escape the area. Since then, Hagari added, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other militant Palestinian groups had returned to the hospital grounds.

"Those that we captured told us very clearly that the hospital was considered safe and that there was water, food, and electricity inside," Hagari recounted. "These were the orders given by the Hamas leadership... hospitals are part of Hamas' military playbook."

Last week, the IDF intelligence directorate released footage from the interrogations of two Palestinian terrorists who stated clearly that their orders had been to return to Al-Shifa Hospital because it was safe, even though it might put ordinary Gazans at risk.

"Hamas controls Gaza by using terror against its people; if a hospital manager refuses to allow Hamas activity in his hospital then he could be fired or worse," Yaar continued, adding that international agencies, including the World Health Organizations, remain silent for the same reasons.

"I can understand why the World Health Organization is embarrassed because there is no doubt that their people on the ground in Gaza knew what was happening there," Yaar said. "Maybe not all the details but they definitely know Hamas is using hospitals."

In a briefing on Monday, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre emphasized that Hamas should not be operating out of hospitals.

"We’ve said that over and over again," she said, adding they are “putting civilians at risk” and that there are also concerns over how “Hamas appears to have been able to reconstitute a hospital so quickly."

"We have made clear that we continue to support Israel’s right to defend itself," Jean-Pierre said. "But we’ve also said, we do not want firefights in a hospital where innocent people, helpless people, people seeking medical care are caught in the crossfire."

She added that the terrorists’ use of hospitals “just points to how challenging Israel's military operation is because Hamas has intentionally embedded themselves into civilian infrastructure and into these hospitals.”

♦
Pro-Israel groups staying on the sidelines in race against Pa’s Summer Lee

Despite Lee's anti-Israel record, AIPAC and DMFI are staying out of the competitive primary — with less than a month left until the election

By Gabby Deutch

Days before the Oct. 7 Hamas terror attacks in Israel, a near-unknown Democrat announced that she was running against Rep. Summer Lee (D-PA), a far-left lawmaker who has clashed with Pittsburgh's Jewish community since she ran to represent the 12th Congressional District in 2022.

Pro-Israel activists in Pittsburgh were still smarting from Lee's razor-thin victory over attorney Steve Irwin in the 2022 Democratic primary. As Lee has taken an increasingly hostile posture toward Israel after the attacks and during Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza, a sizable constituency in Pittsburgh's Jewish community has coalesced around her opponent.

Bhavini Patel, a 30-year-old council member from a small Allegheny County town called Edgewood, has spent the past six months making the case against Lee. In the process, she's earned the backing of many Jewish Democrats who have been alienated by Lee's anti-Israel record — and association with antisemitic individuals.

But while other embattled Squad-affiliated lawmakers, such as Reps. Cori Bush (D-MO) and Jamaal Bowman (D-NY), look vulnerable in primaries, Lee is in better political shape with less than one month before the Pennsylvania primary.

While Irwin earned the endorsement and heavy financial support of major pro-Israel organizations such as AIPAC in 2022, national groups have largely stayed out of the race this year, a signal of how the landscape has shifted in the past two years. Where Lee was an insurgent state representative seeking a national platform in 2022, now she's an incumbent member of Congress with the backing of prominent Democrats in Pennsylvania and in Washington.

"We will be engaged in races where our involvement can have the greatest impact," AIPAC spokesperson Marshall Wittmann said. He did not say if the group would consider supporting Patel in the weeks ahead.

Patel's backers face a double-pronged challenge: They have to convince voters who don't rank the war in the Middle East as a top issue that Lee is also out of step with Democrats on other issues. And within the district's sizable Jewish community, they have to mount an unprecedented mail-in ballot mobilization, since Pennsylvania's primary is the only one in the nation to fall on April 23 — the first day of Passover.

"I don't think I've spoken to a single Jewish Pittsburgher, personally, that's saying, 'I'm voting in person,'" said Laura Chermer, director of the Community Relations Council at Pittsburgh's Jewish Federation. (Chermer has invited Lee and Patel to participate in moderated conversations with the Jewish community; Patel has accepted, but Lee has not.) Pennsylvania does not have early voting, so anyone wishing to avoid the conflict with Passover will need to request and submit a mail-in ballot.

A spokesperson for Patel's campaign said she is working to win over Jewish voters and educate them about the primary's Passover conflict.

"Our campaign is teaming up with leaders of Pittsburgh's Jewish community to educate voters about what makes this primary different from all others: my strong support for our Jewish community, and that Election Day is also the first day of Passover," the Patel spokesperson said, with a line hinting at the Four Questions recited at the Passover Seder.

Observant Jews will be unable to vote in person because they are prohibited to do so by Jewish law due to the Passover holiday, but many Jews who are less observant also face barriers; they will be cooking for Seders, going to synagogue, taking care of children who are home from school or celebrating the holiday out of town. Those who do vote in person may have to go to a different polling place than usual; six locations housed in synagogues and Jewish community centers have moved elsewhere.

Some in the community have taken unconventional avenues to raise the issue with voters. Rabbi Yitzy Genack, a rabbi at the Orthodox Congregation Shaare Torah, dressed up as a mail-in ballot on Purim. He recorded a video that day with Patel encouraging people to send in their mail-in ballots — for Patel. Genack's synagogue is located in Squirrel Hill, a heavily Jewish enclave of the city that sits in Lee's district. It's also home to the Tree of Life synagogue, where 11 people were killed by a white nationalist during a Shabbat prayer service in 2018. That makes what some Jewish community view as Lee's abandonment of Israel especially difficult.

"Her strong support of the Palestinians... and lack of support for Jews and Israelis is a major issue. It's a more major issue because she represents the district that contains the Tree of Life synagogue," said Sue Berman Kress, a Democratic activist who is supporting Patel. "I think there is a way to be supportive of the humanitarian issues that we're all seeing in Gaza, and acknowledge the pain and the horror that the Jewish community is feeling about the surprise attack, about the barbarism, about everything that we all know happened on Oct. 7."

Tree of Life Rabbi Jeffrey Myers was one of more than 40 rabbis and cantors in Pittsburgh to sign a letter denouncing Lee's...
anti-Israel rhetoric last month. The letter came after she canceled an appearance at a gala hosted by CAIR, the Council on American Islamic-Relations, after Jewish Insider reported on the antisemitic views of the event's other speakers. The rabbis acknowledged a meeting with Lee in October, where she pledged to call out antisemitism.

"Sadly, three months later, you have not followed through on those commitments," the rabbis wrote.

Jodi Hirsh, a progressive activist in Pittsburgh who is close to the Lee campaign, told JI that "the Jewish community in Pittsburgh is not a monolith, and many of us have stood with then state Rep. and now Congresswoman Lee for years."

Many Patel supporters point to Lee’s absence from public community-wide vigils remembering the Israelis killed on Oct. 7 and events calling for the release of the hostages still held in Gaza. In a statement on Oct. 7, she condemned “Hamas’ horrifying attack on children and innocent civilians” and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who “has reportedly already targeted densely populated civilian areas.” Less than three weeks later, she was one of just nine Democrats to vote against a resolution expressing support for Israel defending itself against Hamas in Gaza. Lee wore a keffiyeh — the scarf worn by pro-Palestinian activists — and dressed in all black at Biden's State of the Union address in March, refusing to applaud him or join Democratic colleagues in chanting “four more years.” This, Patel’s backers argue, gives her ample fodder to attack Lee for straying from the party mainstream when Biden is months away from a rematch with former President Donald Trump.

“What we have seen with Congresswoman Lee is that she isn’t strong enough for Biden, and she has taken votes and made statements that undermine the president,” said Marjorie Manne, a Pittsburgh lawyer in Squirrel Hill who supports Patel. A staffer for Lee has been operating an Instagram account urging Pennsylvanians to vote “Uncommitted” on their primary ballot, rather than casting a vote for Biden. (A spokesperson for Lee did not respond to a request for comment asking whether she supports the “Uncommitted” campaign. They also did not respond to questions about Lee’s outreach to the Jewish community after Oct. 7.)

Patel is attempting to hammer this message home with new TV ads that focus on her support for Biden. A new TV spot from Patel says she was “100% for” Democrats’ signature infrastructure legislation in 2021, but “Summer Lee was not.” (Lee was not in Congress when the bill passed, but she expressed some reservations about it at the time.) “In the Trump era, Democrats have to stick together,” Patel said in the ad.

Whether this message is getting through to voters beyond the heavily engaged pro-Israel base supporting Patel is unclear, particularly given the dearth of polling at this point in the race.

“I just don’t see them doing a lot of work winning over past Summer Lee voters or convincing new voters to be against Summer Lee, or bringing out more of those people who had already been inclined to be against her,” said one local Democratic strategist who is not supporting either candidate.

But Patel supporters insist that she has momentum and charisma, which they acknowledge Irwin lacked in 2022. He relied too heavily on TV ads from his campaign and media buys from the United Democracy Project, a super PAC affiliated with AIPAC, some Patel supporters say.

“Steve would’ve been an incredible congressman. He’s a really thoughtful, sensitive intellectual. But he’s lower energy. Bhavini is feisty. She’s out there,” said Lou Weiss, a Jewish Republican who is campaigning for Patel. “Some Jews felt last time that there’s no way Summer Lee could be that bad. She was that bad, and worse.”
Harry Dunn is pushing back hard against AIPAC's super PAC. But the pro-Israel PAC says it’s not concerned about his candidacy

The pro-Israel group is supporting one of Dunn's opponents, state Sen. Sarah Elfreth

By Marc Rod

Harry Dunn, the ex-Capitol Police officer who rose to national prominence in the aftermath of the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol and is now running for Congress in Maryland, declared war this week on the United Democracy Project, the AIPAC-affiliated super PAC, after the group launched a $600,000 ad buy supporting one of his opponents.

But UDP, while backing state Sen. Sarah Elfreth, says that it doesn't have any concerns about Dunn's positions on Israel. Elfreth is seen as another leading candidate, alongside Dunn, among the more than 20 Democrats in the race. UDP is not currently running any negative ads in the district.

Dunn has offered a furious response to the news of UDP's spending, in which he has echoed talking points about UDP common among far-left AIPAC opponents, without directly addressing UDP's role as a pro-Israel group.

"A SuperPAC funded by MAGA extremist donors who also gave to Donald Trump, Ted Cruz and Lauren Boebert just dropped $500k in our race. They want to buy this election. They will fail," Dunn said on X. "We can't let MAGA buy this election."

In a further sign of concern about the UDP investment, Dunn announced plans for a press conference about the UDP spending on Wednesday. He plans to denounce "the intrusion of a MAGA Republican-funded super-PAC into the race for Maryland’s Third Congressional District, and [call] on every candidate in the race to condemn and reject this spending," according to a campaign press release.

The release goes on to state that UDP is "meddling" in the primary and is "coming after our movement to protect American democracy," adding that "dark money groups are trying to buy this seat."

Dunn, in an interview with Jewish Insider earlier this year, said he's supportive of additional aid to Israel and Israel's goals of eliminating Hamas and freeing civilian casualties.

Despite his quick and fiery response to its spending, UDP says it's not worried about Dunn.

"While we appreciate Harry Dunn's support for a strong US-Israel relationship, Sarah Elfreth's leadership on abortion rights, climate change, and domestic violence makes her a stronger candidate for the voters of Howard, Anne Arundel and Carroll counties," UDP spokesperson Patrick Dorton said. "There are some serious anti-Israel candidates in this race, who are not Harry Dunn, and we need to make sure that they don't make it to Congress."

Internal polling by Elfreth's campaign that was first published by Maryland Matters suggested a close race between Elfreth and Dunn, with state Sen. Clarice Lam rounding out the field as a potential third viable candidate. None of the other candidates appeared viable, according to the survey.

Elfreth also has the backing of a range of local unions, political groups and elected officials. Dunn has seen blockbuster fundraising from a national donor base, owing to his post-Jan. 6 public profile, which will help him remain competitive.

Other candidates have taken public stances more critical of Israel, including state Del. Terri Hill, who, according to local media, sponsored a resolution criticizing Israel's military campaign and calling for a ceasefire. Hill, however, no longer appears as a cosponsor of the legislation on the Maryland legislative database.

John Morse, who was endorsed by Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT), has also leaned into calls for a permanent ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.

AIPAC hasn't yet made a formal endorsement in the race.

Elfreth, for her part, is taking a largely pro-Israel stance, but is not fully hewing to AIPAC's positions on the war in the Middle East.

She told Jewish Insider that she doesn't support placing conditions on U.S. aid to Israel. She added that she "strongly believe[s] that all nations have a responsibility in supporting humanitarian aid to the region" as "the only way to begin the "very long road towards a peaceful two-state solution" in Gaza, but said that humanitarian-related conditions on arms sales would not be "appropriate from the legislative branch."

"I trust that President Biden and his advisers are negotiating [increased humanitarian aid] with Israeli leadership," she said. "And I think that's where it would be more effective to have that conversation."

She said that she would support a permanent cease-fire conditioned on the return of the hostages and the provision of additional humanitarian aid. She also said that the long-term goal in the region must be peace and a two-state solution, but reiterated that the process must begin with a hostage release and humanitarian aid.

"We can't stop with a cease-fire will solve everything," she continued. "It is under those conditions, the beginning step of building toward a lasting — I have no illusions, I think this will take my lifetime to achieve but it has to be the goal — of
the beginning step of a lasting two-state solution.”

When pressed, she also said that Hamas must be removed from power in Gaza in order to move toward long-term peace, adding, “I’m not a military expert, so I’m not quite sure how to do that.”

Elfeth said she didn’t have strong knowledge about the U.S.’ recent decision to abstain on a U.N. Security Council vote for a cease-fire, but pointed to concerns about one-sided legislation pushing for a cease-fire at the local level.

“There have been a lot of state and local resolutions on this issue that are not as balanced and nuanced as the situation deserves,” she said. “I would like to see all sides reflected in those resolutions.”

She described Iran’s influence in the region and the situation in the West Bank as further obstacles to peace.

Asked about tackling the threats that Iran and its proxies pose not only in Gaza but also throughout the region, Elfeth said she doesn’t have the foreign policy expertise to offer specific solutions, but said that Israel’s safety must be central to the U.S.’ strategy.

“Ensuring that our only democratic ally in the region remains in the region is the first block,” she said. “It’s naïve to think that it would ever stop with Israel. And I think there are significant threats to democracy across the world if we don’t take Iran as seriously as they deserve to be taken... This is not at all isolated to the current front of the war.”

Elfeth also repeatedly expressed concerns about some of the public statements and decisions made by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, but said that conversations about Israel’s leadership and governance should be handled in private between the two allies, when asked about Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer’s (D-NY) speech denouncing the Israeli leader.

She compared the situation to her own concerns about and disagreements with former President Donald Trump and his leadership — “I think we can all appreciate, as Americans, supporting a country without necessarily supporting its leader.”

Elfeth visited Israel for the first time in July alongside state lawmakers from around the country, describing the trip as “life-changing,” including visits to a kibbutz that was attacked by Hamas on Oct. 7, an Iron Dome battery, a Hezbollah tunnel on the Lebanese border, the West Bank and religious sites.

Reflecting on her meeting with a Palestinian Authority official in the West Bank, she described him as a “public servant who was passionate about representing his people and finding a longer term two-state solution.”

But she also said that he had used “some verbiage... that I didn't quite agree with” and that an evasive answer he provided about the PA’s failure to hold elections for more than a decade raised concerns that “the PA was very interested in retaining power above finding a lasting two-state solution.”

Like many lawmakers who visit the region, she described her time there as “incredibly sobering,” highlighting Israel’s small size and the many threats it faces. Her biggest takeaway, she added, was that “fundamentally” there must be a Jewish state.

Back home, Elfeth said she has worked on increasing funding to houses of worship that have faced threats and vandalism, as well as working to strengthen hate crimes laws.

“We can’t legislate against hate, we can do everything we can to make sure people will feel safe in their own communities,” she said. “We can make sure our laws are going to make it really uncomfortable for people to feel comfortable expressing hate in our communities.”

Speaking about her run more generally, the state senator played up her bipartisan work in the state senate, leaning into her experience as a lawmaker and accessibility to the community, and emphasizing that she’s running for Congress to make progress on issues that matter to her community.

“Everybody I’ve talked to seems to want somebody who has a proven track record of being an effective legislator and being a part of the community and showing up and delivering for the communities of the 3rd Congressional District,” she said.

“It’s not an allusion to any of my opponents in particular... I think we have far too many people in Congress who are focused on getting a slot on cable news or gaining Twitter followers and not enough who just want to do the work,” she continued. “That’s what I bring, and maybe it’s not as exciting as other candidates and what they can bring to the table. But I’m in this to do the work and to be a good and effective representative for my district.”

Jewish Insider’s senior national correspondent Gabby Deutch contributed reporting.
Despite war’s challenges, Abraham Accords Peace Institute CEO optimistic about the region’s future

Aryeh Lightstone tells JI that while business ties continue between Israel and Accords partners, people-to-people efforts have been damaged since war in Gaza began

By Lahav Harkov

Since Hamas’ attack on Oct. 7, Israel’s relations with Arab states have been under significant stress, with leaders across the region criticizing to varying degrees Israel’s war effort while expressing support for the Palestinian cause.

Yet, unlike in the Second Intifada or early-aughts rounds of fighting against Hamas in Gaza, no Arab countries have cut relations with Israel since the start of the war nearly six months ago.

As the Abraham Accords Peace Institute (AAPI) states in its 2023 Annual Report, provided exclusively to Jewish Insider ahead of its publication on Tuesday, Israel’s 2020 normalization agreements with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco, plus Kosovo and prior peace agreements with Jordan and Egypt, “survived, and diplomatic and trade relations have continued.”

Among the positive developments reported by the AAPI, an organization founded by Jared Kushner, son-in-law and former senior advisor to former President Donald Trump, in 2020: a meeting between Israeli President Isaac Herzog and Emirati President Mohammad bin Zayed (MBZ) in the UAE in November, as well as then-Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen’s visit to Bahrain in September. The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor initiative was announced in September, with plans to connect East Asia to Europe via the Gulf and Israel.

In an economic boost, a UAE-Israel free trade deal went into effect in April. Trade between Israel and Abraham Accords signatories, as well as with Jordan and Egypt increased 16% in 2023, surpassing $4 billion; measuring only the months before the Hamas attack on Israel, trade grew 24%.

After Oct. 7, “despite tensions and disagreements, the leaderships of the Abraham Accords countries affirmed their continued commitment to these historic agreements,” the report reads. “Accords countries were able to leverage the trust built with Israel over the previous years to coordinate humanitarian and medical aid to Gaza.”

However, the report points out, “the war had a strongly negative impact on regional public opinion towards Israel, while also slowing progress towards Israel-Saudi normalization.”

The CEO of the Abraham Accords Peace Institute, Aryeh Lightstone, is acutely aware of the challenges the war in Gaza poses to Israel’s relations – open and secret – in the region.

However, in an interview with JI, Lightstone, the Trump administration’s special envoy for economic normalization and senior adviser to former U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, explained why there are still plenty of reasons to be optimistic and how the Abraham Accords can still serve as an example and a platform for advancing peace in the Middle East.

Jewish Insider: You’re presenting the report to the Knesset on Tuesday in a special meeting. Is this the time for a celebratory meeting, in the middle of a war?

Aryeh Lightstone: I think there’s a reason the Knesset is willing to do that. Sen. James Lankford (R-OK) is coming to share some words and the Knesset Speaker [Amir Ohana] will spend time on this. In a year that is so filled with frustration, anguish and disappointment, the Abraham Accords describe a pathway forward for the region. It’s incredibly important to remember the lessons that got us to the Abraham Accords originally, and how they’ll get us out of the circumstances we’re in now.

The U.S. has to stand with no daylight with our ally Israel, beat back Iran and its malign influences. Perfect is the enemy of good: Israel doesn’t have to be perfectly aligned with the UAE, Bahrain or Saudi Arabia...We need to understand that working together is better than working apart... This is a better way, a different way. People should be bullishly optimistic.

A solution for Gaza will be better with these relationships.

JI: Do you think there is a chance that the UAE or Saudi Arabia will be part of the solution for Gaza? They set challenging conditions in public for helping with reconstruction.

AL: If you look at Saudi Arabia after 9/11, there was a meaningful concern that they were what was wrong with the region. Today, you can make the argument that they are what is correct in the region... How do you move from radical Islam to moderate Islam [in Gaza]? The UAE has done this for 50 years. There is a road map for how to get this done that is distinctly different from what the international community is saying, and it has nothing to do with the [Palestinian Authority] or Hamas. Purely using them as a road map would be an enormous step forward.

Without a road map, I’m not sure why anyone would jump into something that looks like a sinking ship. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Morocco – all the countries in or who would want to join the Abraham Accords – have no interest in affiliation with Hamas or its henchmen in Gaza. They would like to see the elimination of radical Islamic terrorists, if possible with zero civilian casualties – which is not actually possible.

Our inability to be nuanced on this issue hurts the region. We have to say these things...
clearly and carefully.

**JI:** You mention Saudi Arabia as a country that wants to join the Abraham Accords – where do you think that stands?

**AL:** I think there will be meaningful talk about normalization with Saudi Arabia this summer... If it’s a deal that is peace for peace, it should be pursued rigorously and speedily. Creating peace that is dependent on the Israeli-Palestinian relationship as it stands today is asking for long-term challenges in that relationship. We should get off on the right foot.

It’s important to double down on the existing relationships and praise those countries for holding it together during this time, so that when the time comes, they’re ready to jump forward meaningfully.

**JI:** Let’s back up to Oct. 7. How did relations between Israel and other Abraham Accords countries change since then?

**AL:** It fundamentally changed things in two different ways. Israel put up a sign that says “we’re busy, be back later.” Masses of people were serving in reserves... There was no time for anything else. Tech people were in the [war] field, workers were in the field, leadership was in the field. They took six to eight weeks off from an economic perspective. Business just fell off a cliff, because of a lack of ability... Israel was closed for business, I’d argue, for eight weeks.

In the process of those eight weeks, the East caught up with the West. Students at Harvard started protesting for Palestinians on Oct. 9, before Israel did anything... Nobody in the Middle East was protesting in favor of Hamas at that point. It took the hospital fake news piece about the [Al-Ahli] Hospital that was ultimately dispelled [to spark protests in the region]. When President Biden came to Israel, and Jordan, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority refused to meet with him based on a fake news story, and he didn’t put his foot down and say, “You’re meeting with me,” that was a signal for the rest of the countries. The game was lost at that point.

**JI:** How did that turning point play out in the region?

**AL:** From that moment until today, much of the goodwill that had gone into people-to-people efforts [between Israel and Abraham Accords states], getting to know each other, had disappeared. If in America, research showed that TikTok is 86% anti-Israel, in the Arab world it’s 99.9%, and that caused an enormous hiccup.

**JI:** Business ties are a key part of Israel’s relations with Abraham Accord countries – were those hurt as well?

**AL:** The business numbers continued to a great degree. If you take out those eight weeks, the last month of 2023 was strong. Business continued to happen after Israel opened its doors.

**JI:** Do you think there’s a chance for relations between Israel and the region to recover in 2024?

**AL:** Depending what happens in the north, and assuming there is not an all-out war [between Israel and Lebanon], I think 2024 is going to see a reset starting on Sept. 1, a dating process between the people of Israel and the Abraham Accords countries. It’ll start with the UAE, because they’ll lead this again, followed by Bahrain and Morocco, and depending on how the U.S. elections go...extend to other interested countries, as well.

**JI:** Israel’s natural gas exports to Egypt and Jordan increased by 24% in 2023, but there has been talk in recent months, especially from Jordan, about cutting cooperation with Israel. What are your projections for gas and energy cooperation between Israel and the region in 2024?

**AL:** Israeli-Egypt relations remain strong in that regard. It’s great that they are advancing beyond just security. And you can see the UAE investing in the Egyptian economy.

In terms of energy, Israel was about to conclude an enormous deal in the private sector with BP and ADNOC [before Oct. 7]. In the future of the Middle East, there will be enormous energy deals that will continue to solidify the relationship between Israel and countries in the region.

We will see the UAE and other countries participate in deals for the gas Israel has in the Mediterranean Sea, both to help supply Europe more meaningfully and to Jordan... which is in desperate need of water and energy. Jordan has challenges working with Israel, but this is the advantage – as the region moves towards peace, they should be able to benefit meaningfully.

**JI:** In light of the war in Gaza, Jordan refused to sign onto the Blue-Green Deal, whereby Israel would provide Jordan with desalinated water in exchange for building a solar field in Jordan that would provide energy to Israel. How do the sides move forward from there?

**AL:** Had the U.S. embraced the Abraham Accords differently, I think this deal would have already been done. It’s an enormous hiccup and we have to get it back on track.

To a great degree, I think it will be easier now that there are no shovel in the ground to articulate a different or better deal at the right time... A reconstituted deal would likely involve the private sector selling water to Jordan. People in the region are realizing that government-to-government is more challenging and business-to-business is more likely to succeed.

It’s much more challenging [for Jordan] to reject a business than to say no to Israel time and time again.

It all goes back to MBZ hosting Herzog in the middle of a war. There’s the idea and the reality in the Middle East. People dealing with reality are building a future, but the purists are stuck. Whatever they’re imagining is not what exists today and not likely what it will be.

**JI:** Has Oct. 7 changed anything for the proposed India-Middle East-Europe Corridor land route?

**AL:** By 2035, we’re going to look back and see that this region has become something that none of us could imagine – maybe [UAE leader] MBZ or [Saudi Crown Prince] MBS [Mohammed bin Salman] could, but nobody in Israel.

Part of the motivation behind it is to differentiate from China, but the other part is that there is an enormous natural partnership.

**JI:** Israel’s National Security Council released a new travel warning last week, and Egypt and Jordan were there as usual in times of conflict, but of the Abraham Accords countries, only Morocco was listed. What’s happening there?

**AL:** The UAE is consistently ranked as the safest country in the world, tied with Singapore... Bahrain is safe, too. [President Herzog] was invited to the UAE
in the middle of the war and there were no significant security concerns, which speaks meaningfully to where the UAE and the Abraham Accords are.

Morocco is very safe for its region of the world, but it is much larger. Israelis don’t just go to Casablanca and Rabat; they travel the entire country. And Morocco is not under a security microscope like the UAE; it has a very large population... The economic benefits of the Abraham Accords to Morocco, including connectivity to the U.S., brought the election of a pro-Western government, but three years doesn’t change the culture.

Algerians could get into Morocco and try to make something happen. It’s a challenging security situation.

The last thing Morocco wants is for Israelis to come and be in any form of danger or harassment...[Israel and Morocco] probably agreed on the warning. I think it was a mature decision.

This is a relationship that is ready to spring again. Let’s wait until things are calm, and we should be able to start again from where we were.

JI: You were only supposed to be the temporary CEO of the Abraham Accords Peace Institute, but here you are months later presenting the 2023 report. What made you decide to stay?

AL: [Former AAPI CEO and Senior Director for Middle Eastern and North African Affairs at the National Security Council] Robert Greenway got a great offer from the Heritage Foundation, and Jared [Kushner] asked if I would take over for a transitionary period and help find a new CEO. I was supposed to start on Oct. 8. Then, Oct. 7 happened, and Jared said the AAPI can’t just write reports, we have to be in the weeds and know what is going on. I have taken on this job as a full-time volunteer to move things in the right direction.

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I don’t think there is anything more important to do with my time than to try to hold on to what we have in the Abraham Accords and build on the opportunities for the future. ♦

APRIL 1, 2024

Rep. Gonzales’ right-wing GOP challenger posted videos featuring Nazi imagery, songs, jokes

Brandon Herrera, a social media influencer, was also active in the Sons of Confederate Veterans organization

By Marc Rod

Brandon Herrera, a 28-year-old Republican congressional candidate challenging Rep. Tony Gonzales (R-TX) in next month’s GOP runoff, has posted as recently as 2022 YouTube videos replete with imagery, music and jokes about the Nazi regime and the Holocaust and was also active for years with a Sons of Confederate Veterans group in North Carolina.

Herrera is running against Gonzales from his right in a district that hags the Texas-Mexico border from San Antonio to El Paso. Gonzales garnered 45% of the vote in the early March primary, outpacing Herrera’s 25%. But since Gonzales failed to win an outright majority of the vote in the primary, he now faces Herrera in a May 28 runoff, where the challenger threatens to consolidate the right-wing vote.

Herrera is a prolific YouTuber, also known as the AK Guy, with more than 3 million subscribers, primarily posting videos about guns. In one video from 2022, he shows off the MP-40, a submachine gun developed in and widely used by Nazi Germany. He refers to it, seemingly jokingly, as “the original ghetto blaster” — apparently alluding to the Nazis’ killing of Jews.

The video, which appears to take a sarcastic tone, includes a montage of Herrera and an associate firing the weapon, goose-stepping and showing off other Nazi weaponry, set to the song “Erika,” which was popularized as a Nazi marching song and which has seen frequent use in modern neo-Nazi and far-right propaganda.

The montage culminates with Herrera’s associate, wearing a camouflage outfit with colors resembling a pattern used by the Waffen SS, beginning a Hitler salute before being stopped by Herrera, seemingly in jest.

Herrera’s campaign did not respond to a request for comment.

Herrera suggests in the video that he’s aware of the connotations of “Erika,” encouraging “the few people out there that realize there’s absolutely nothing wrong with the song we just used and it’s a bunch of soldiers singing about a pretty girl they miss at home” to subscribe to his YouTube channel.

Throughout the video, Herrera repeatedly acknowledges the potentially inflammatory subject matter, describing the montage as “The Forbidden LARP” (an acronym for Live Action Role Play).

He adds later in the video that he made “really f***ed up jokes,” saying he did so to encourage his audience to learn from and not repeat history. He adds that he’s “not really a big fan of fascism.”

Later in the video, before firing the weapon into a case of beverages, Herrera yells, “Gestapo right there.”

Herrera’s YouTube account liked comments on the video applauding the “ghetto blaster” joke and stating, “been wanting to see you cover more funny mustache man Germany guns.” “Funny
mustache man” is a reference to Hitler used in some right-wing internet circles.

Herrera also played “Erika” in the background of a previous video from 2020, which also covered Nazi guns, along with other Nazi military marching songs, including “SS marschiert in Feindesland” (SS marches in enemy territory) and “Panzerlied” (Tank Song). Herrera’s YouTube account liked several comments on that video praising his use of the Nazi marching songs.

Herrera, who also owns a Fayetteville, N.C.-based gun manufacturing company, has also been a member, over the course of numerous years, of the Fayetteville chapter of the Sons of Confederate Veterans. In 2014, he filmed a video for the SCV chapter to welcome and advertise to new members.

“The SCV… is a historical honor society dedicated to preserving confederate heritage and learning more about our ancestors who fought and died in the War of Northern Aggression.” Herrera says in the video, wearing a shirt featuring a Confederate flag and using a term that places blame for the Civil War on the Union.

Herrera says in the video that the group’s purpose is to “celebrate” and “protect” Confederate history. He adds that the group also holds an “annual Yankee shoot,” where the group uses antique rifles to shoot at “posters of our favorite Yankees,” as well as an annual ball honoring Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson and a summer camp honoring another Confederate figure. He also complains about a highway built next to the site of a major Confederate arsenal, which he said is “totally disrespecting the heritage.”

“We’re here to protect sites like this, and stop things like that from happening,” he continues, pointing at the highway. “Because those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

In another 2014 welcome video, he refers to the Civil War as “the war for Southern Independence.” Herrera can also be seen in a brief clip included in a 2013 promo for the SCV camp; that video begins with the line, “we learned to fire the cannons at the heathen Yankee horde,” and also includes a reference to “train[ing] to kill some Yankees.”

He remained active with the group until at least 2019; he’s seen in one photo from the July 2019 SCV National Reunion in Mobile, Ala., in front of a “Confederate Dead” monument, and also led the group in singing “Dixie,” an anthem of the Confederacy, in a video from that reunion.

In a February 2019 photo also posted by the Fayetteville chapter, he appears with the group in full Confederate uniform as part of an “Honor Guard.” The photo is captioned “paying the last respects for a Fellow Compatriot.”

A Brandon Joseph Herrera is also registered to vote from an address in Fayetteville, according to North Carolina’s voter registration database. A Google Street View search for that address shows, as of January 2024, a Confederate flag and a blue flag with a single white star — briefly used by the Confederacy — flying on a flagpole in the front yard.

APRIL 1, 2024

Trump’s Israel interview divides Republican Jewish community

Fred Zeidman: ‘It obviously concerns me. But again, that’s part of the reason that we’ve got to double our effort to show President Trump that we continue to be behind him’

By Gabby Deutch

Former President Donald Trump has cast himself as the most pro-Israel president in American history, pointing to achievements such as negotiating the Abraham Accords and moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem.

But recent comments Trump made about Israel’s conduct during the ongoing war in Gaza and its public relations failures, along with his relative silence on the war for more than five months, are serving as a reminder that a second Trump term could mean more unpredictability over Middle East policy than his once-reliably pro-Israel posture.

The interview, which Trump gave to the right-leaning Israeli newspaper Israel Hayom, drew mixed reactions from Jewish Republicans and conservatives.

“Israel has to be very careful, because you’re losing a lot of the world, you’re losing a lot of support, you have to finish up, you have to get the job done,” Trump told Israel Hayom. “I think Israel made a very big mistake. I wanted to call [Israel] and say don’t do it. These photos and shots. I mean, moving shots of bombs being dropped into buildings in Gaza. And I said, ‘Oh, that’s a terrible portrait. It’s a very bad picture for the world.’”

Fred Zeidman, a major Houston-based donor to former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley’s primary campaign who has now thrown his support behind Trump, acknowledged that Trump’s rhetoric represented a shift for him. But, Zeidman added, that language must be compared to Biden’s actions, including the White House's decision last week not to veto the United Nations Security Council to pass a resolution calling for a cease-fire.

“That is just fodder for antisemites and Israel’s enemies to grab onto and say, ‘Oh, Trump says Israel’s losing...
every one," one Jewish Republican who was close to the Haley campaign said. "Trump's silence, Trump's refusal to offer a full-throated defense of Israel, I think is very, very unfortunate and hurts Israel."

"It obviously concerns me. But again, that's part of the reason that we've got to double our effort to show President Trump that we continue to be behind him, and he's the one that we're counting on," Zeidman said. "President Trump has said a few things that aren't as stridently in support as he has before. But there's no comparison with what the Biden administration's actually doing."

One Jewish Republican who was close to the Haley campaign said Trump's comments about Israel's dwindling global support and its poor PR game only help Israel's detractors.

"That is just fodder for antisemites and Israel's enemies to grab onto and say, 'Oh, Trump says Israel's losing everyone,'" the Haley supporter said. "Trump's silence, Trump's refusal to offer a full-throated defense of Israel, I think is very, very unfortunate and hurts Israel."

Commentary editor John Podhoretz noted that Trump's remarks, in substance, sound similar to the rhetoric Biden uses when trying to balance his support for Israel's war against Hamas with frustration over the humanitarian toll of the conflict.

"You take people at their word, and I know that what [Trump] said is very vague and self-contradictory and all that. But he basically said, 'It looks very bad, and they shouldn't be doing it.'" Podhoretz said. "I don't see how that's any different from what the Biden people are talking, and Biden has actually at least been supportive of Israel's war effort. Trump has been standing there not talking about it much at all."

"Everybody is just misreading this. There's nothing interesting at all about it," Republican Jewish Coalition CEO Matt Brooks told Jewish Insider. "Basically, he's giving Israel a blank check to do what it needs to finish the job. All he's saying is that the longer this goes on, public opinion continues to turn against them, so hurry up."

"I do believe actions speak louder than words, certainly as it relates to foreign policy. But I think that's a pretty good general rule," Jeff Bartos, a real estate investor in Pennsylvania who ran in the Republican primary for the U.S. Senate in 2022, said. "I think President Trump's record on supporting the U.S.-Israel relationship and supporting Israel I think is among the best, if not the best, we've seen in our lifetimes."

Jeff Bartos, a real estate investor in Pennsylvania who ran in the Republican primary for the U.S. Senate in 2022, said Trump's remarks didn't sound too different from conversations he has been part of at dinner parties in recent months.

"In fact, at dinner last Saturday, the two other couples we were with, all four of them said something along the lines of, 'Israel needs better PR, and Israel's PR is the worst ever,'" Bartos said. He added that he prefers to judge Trump by the actions he took as president.

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But in more partisan GOP circles, Jewish Republican officials insist Trump is giving Israel the space it needs to defeat Hamas — and is only concerned about the timetable.

In the Israel Hayom interview, Trump called the Oct. 7 attack "horrible" and said he "would act very much the same way as you did. You would have to be crazy not to." But, he added, Israel needs to improve its public relations, "because right now they're in ruin."

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Trump told Israel Hayom that Hamas would not have attacked Israel if he were president because Biden is a "very dumb person" whom Hamas does not respect. Trump's Republican critics agreed that Biden's foreign policy had not made the world a safer place, but they did not place the blame for Oct. 7 at his feet.

"I do think that Biden's weakness in foreign policy does have consequences. It does send a message to America's enemies, to our allies' enemies, that says, 'Yes, please, take advantage of us,'" said the Haley supporter. But, they added, Hamas has "been trying to do this for a decade. Whoever is sitting in the Oval Office, as long as Hamas exists, they're going to try to kill Israelis. That's why Israel has to defeat them."

The interview came as many Trump-critical Republican donors have fallen in line behind the former president after he secured the GOP nomination.

Last Thursday, another of Haley's strongest supporters in the Jewish community, Eric Levine, sent an email to his network announcing that he would support Trump — after insisting, since the Capitol riot on Jan. 6, 2021, that he would not vote for the former president again. Levine decried the anti-Zionism on the left, and Biden's reliance on far-left voters.

"On the one hand, Joe Biden needs the votes of those who embrace and advocate for the expansion of this evil. On the other hand, Donald Trump — whose grandchildren are being raised as proud American Orthodox Jews — wants to stamp it out. It leaves me no choice but to vote for Trump," wrote Levine, a New York lawyer. He did not mention Trump's comments on Israel in the email.

Other leading Trump-critical GOP donors have also indicated they'll reconsider donating to the former president's campaign, according to the Washington Post, including Oracle founder Larry Ellison (a top backer of Sen. Tim Scott's presidential bid) and Blackstone Group CEO Stephen Schwarzman.