Tucker Carlson’s ‘pastor from Bethlehem’ is ‘the high priest of antisemitic Christianity’

Munther Isaac justified Oct. 7 attack and is on the board of an organization calling Judaism a ‘dead letter’

By Lahav Harkov

When Tucker Carlson said he wanted to know how the government of Israel treats Christians, he opted against interviewing Israeli Christians, choosing instead to speak to a Palestinian Christian pastor who founded an anti-Israel organization and justified Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack on Israel.

Munther Isaac, the pastor featured in a 40-minute interview with Carlson that aired on X on Tuesday, gave a sermon on Oct. 8, 2023, in which he said the attack—a day prior—in which 1,200 Israelis were slaughtered by Hamas was a logical outcome.

“What is happening is an embodiment of the injustice that has befallen us as Palestinians from the Nakba until now,” Isaac said in the sermon, using the Arabic word for “catastrophe,” that Palestinians use to mark the creation of Israel in 1948 and displacement of some 750,000 Palestinians.

“Frankly, anyone following the events was not surprised by what happened yesterday... One of the scenes that left an impression on my mind yesterday, and there are many scenes, is the scene of the Israeli youth who were celebrating a concert in the open air [the Nova music festival] just outside the borders of Gaza, and how they escaped. What a great contradiction, between the besieged poor on the one hand, and the wealthy people celebrating as if there was nothing behind the wall. Gaza exposes the hypocrisy of the world.”

On Christmas Eve last year, Isaac, the pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, in the West Bank, delivered a sermon in which he said that “if Jesus were to be born today, he would be born under the rubble in Gaza.” Jesus, who was Jewish and not Palestinian, a term that was only officially used for the region by the Romans a century later, was born in Bethlehem, which is near Jerusalem and not where the war is currently taking place. Bethlehem is currently under Israeli military control, but civilian matters—such as official religious tolerance—in the city are the responsibility of the Palestinian Authority.
Isaac is a board member of Kairos Palestine, an organization launched in 2009 whose founding document makes antisemitic statements, such as engaging in replacement theology to deny the Jewish people’s historic connection to Israel. The Kairos Document calls the Torah a “dead letter...used as a weapon in our present history in order to deprive us of our rights in our own land.” The document also states that “Christian love invites us to resist,” and describes the First Intifada, a campaign of attacks on Israelis as a “peaceful struggle.” The Kairos home page currently describes the war in Gaza as a genocide, and the organization supports boycotts against Israel.

Isaac is also the director of the Bethlehem Bible College’s biannual “Christ at the Checkpoint” annual conferences, meant to promote Palestinian nationalism among Christian leaders, or as they put it “challenge evangelicals to take responsibility to help resolve the conflicts in Israel-Palestine by engaging with the teaching of Jesus.” Its manifesto states that “the occupation is the core issue of the conflict.” While the conference’s manifesto states that it opposes antisemitism and delegitimization of Israel, it also describes current Israeli policy as “discrimination or privileges based on ethnicity” stemming from “worldviews that promote divine national entitlement or exceptionalism.”

Among the antisemitic statements made at the conference over the years, collected by NGO Monitor, an organization that researches the activities and funding of nonprofits relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict, are: “If God wanted the Jews to have the land...I didn't want that God anymore!” “If you put King David, Jesus and Netanyahu [through a DNA test], you will get nothing, because Netanyahu comes from an East European tribe who converted to Judaism in the Middle Ages.” “Jews who reject Jesus Christ are outside the covenant of grace and are to be regarded as children of Hagar,” as opposed to Abraham and Sarah. The final quote is from Stephen Sizer, a British pastor who has engaged in Holocaust denial and blaming Israel for 9/11.

Rev. Johnnie Moore, president of the Congress of Christian Leaders, said that “those of us who track these things know that Munther Isaac has long been the high priest of antisemitic Christianity; sadly, he spreads his hate from the city of Jesus’ birth.”

“Since Oct. 7,” Moore added, “Isaac seems to have graduated from being an anti-Zionist Lutheran preacher to a terror sympathizer. There’s really just no other way to describe him.”

Jonathan Elkhoury, a Christian Lebanese refugee granted Israeli citizenship, said he was “appalled and ashamed” at Carlson’s choice to invite Isaac onto his show, preferring “rhetoric of lies and misinformation about Israel or its treatment of minorities” rather than “a voice that speaks about Christian life in the Holy Land.”

“Tucker Carlson should have taken his platform more seriously, and not invite political activists, in the disguise of a religious robe, to support the ongoing dehumanization of Israelis and the denial of the right of Israel to exist,” he said.

In his introduction to the interview with Isaac, Carlson said that Christians suffer disproportionately in wars in which the U.S. supplies weapons.

However, the Christian population in the West Bank and Gaza declined significantly in recent decades since coming under Palestinian control, amid pressure from the PA and attempts to Islamize the city, in addition to difficulties relating to Israel's security control of the area experienced by Palestinians regardless of religion.

Elkhoury said that when Israel had control over Bethlehem, the city had a population that was over 60% Christian. After the 1993 Oslo Accords, which gave the PA control of the city, the number of Christians has since declined to about 12%.

There were 3,000 Christians in Gaza when Israel withdrew from the coastal enclave in 2005, a number that fell to about 1,100 as of last year, he said.

“Hamas prevented Christians [from] celebrat[ing] their holidays freely under its control since taking power, and Christians under the PA have faced many ongoing threats and attacks,” Elkhoury said. “The last one of them was an attack on the Jacob's Well monastery in Nablus by a Palestinian mob last January.”

Israel's Christian community, which is about 2% of the country's population, has been rising steadily for the past few years, and is the only growing Christian population in the Middle East. Arab Christians are also the most educated population group in Israel, with a higher percentage of university graduates than Jewish or Muslim Israelis.

Rep. Dan Crenshaw (R-TX) said Carlson's take on Israel's treatment of Christians is "nonsense," calling the former Fox News host "a cowardly, know-nothing elitist who is full of shit."

"Tucker's MO is simple: defend America's enemies and attack America's allies," Crenshaw wrote on X. "There isn't an objective bone left in that washed up news host's body. Mindless contrarianism is his guiding principle...He uses his platform to sow doubt and paranoia and false narratives."
Several university leaders begin cracking down on anti-Israel disruptions on campus

Administrators at Pomona, Columbia and Vanderbilt have taken a harder line in recent weeks

By Haley Cohen

Last Friday, police officers dressed in riot gear arrested at least 20 masked students at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif., after some 150 people stormed the university president’s office and refused to leave for more than three hours. Organized by the student-led group Pomona Divest Apartheid, the demonstrators from Pomona, as well as nearby Scripps and Pitzer Colleges, were protesting the removal of an anti-Israel “mock apartheid wall” on campus.

Earlier this month, Columbia University indefinitely suspended four students for participating in a campus event called “Resistance 101,” led by prominent Palestinian activist Khaled Barakat, who appeared by video to discuss the war in Gaza that started in the wake of Hamas’ Oct. 7 attacks. Barakat reportedly said that “friends and brothers in Hamas, Islamic Jihad” were excited to see student groups in the U.S. protesting on their behalf.

And at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., late last month, four students were arrested after staging a sit-in at the university’s main administration building for nearly 24 hours, demanding that the Tennessee school divest from companies that operate in Israel.

Six months after anti-Israel activity began to dominate many college campuses in the wake of the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks — with minimal action taken by college presidents to quell rising levels of antisemitism — administrators at schools such as Pomona, Columbia and Vanderbilt have taken a harder line in recent weeks. As a result, Jewish leaders are wondering whether these three schools’ tougher responses could represent the leading edge of a trend that takes root across the country.

Jacob Baime, CEO of the Israel on Campus Coalition, told Jewish Insider that other universities will only take similar action if they are pressured to do so. “The suspension of anti-Israel activists at schools like Vanderbilt University is a step in the right direction in addressing the campus climate,” Baime said.

In a statement to Pomona College on Friday, the school’s president, Gabrielle Starr, warned that “any participants in today’s events... who turn out to be Pomona students, are subject to immediate suspension. Students from the other Claremont Colleges will be banned from Pomona’s campus and subject to discipline on their own campuses.”

“I don’t see this as a victory and I don’t know if it’s going to change anything in the future,” Ayelet Kleinerman, a fourth-year Pomona student from Israel who founded the group Haverim Claremont in 2022, told JI. “There is a lot of backlash here from students, faculty and community members on the outside,” she continued. “So we will have to wait and see how things unfold, but when people are arrested I don’t see it as a victory — it’s sad that we got to a situation in the first place where police needed to be called. We shouldn’t have gotten to this in the first place.”

Kleinerman, who started Haverim as a way for Jewish and non-Jewish students to connect and learn about antisemitism — something she felt was missing from on-campus groups in the past — said the climate on campus for Jewish students since Oct. 7 “has been hard and intimidating, [filled] with a lot of [anti-Israel] protests.”

For months, Jewish students and alumni from the Claremont Consortium—Pomona College, Scripps College, Claremont McKenna College, Harvey Mudd College, and Pitzer College (known as the 5Cs), have urged administrators to take action in response to what they called in a Nov. 6 email “harassment of Jewish Students at Pomona College.”

“We are particularly alarmed by the administration’s acquiescence in the face of gross violations of College policy and applicable law,” the letter, signed by a group of 5C alumni said, pointing to several incidents at Pomona, including a demonstration on Oct. 20 when “Claremont Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace held a rally at Pomona’s Smith Campus Center with several hundred attendees. At that rally, SJP and JVP members assembled, at the Smith Campus Center (a shared space intended for use by all College students), a display honoring the Hamas terrorists responsible for the genocidal attacks of October 7.”

According to a university statement, “Unidentified, masked individuals have repeatedly disrupted and/or forced the cancellation of events on our campus since October 2023, including Pomona’s Family Weekend events, a gathering for high school counselors and Harvey Mudd College’s Presidential Inauguration.”

“Our response has been graduated, with repeated warnings and reminders of policy,” the statement continued. “President Starr has repeatedly offered to meet with students and multiple dialogue sessions have been held. However, the violations from some individuals have escalated.”

“I wish they stopped it earlier,” Kleinerman said, “I think [Friday] was just the last straw on a long list of breaking policies.”

Later this month, the Associated Students of Pomona College are slated to vote on a non-binding student referendum that calls for an academic boycott of Israel.
and divestment from companies with ties to Israel.

In a campus-wide email, a copy of which was obtained by JI, Starr wrote that “the referendum raises the specter of antisemitism.”

In an open letter sent Monday from Pomona College tour guides and admissions interns, dozens of students wrote that “the school's decision to call in over 30 militarized police officers to arrest 20 unarmed, peaceful student protesters... was an egregious violation of students' safety at their place of living and learning.” The signatories threatened to “strike [giving campus tours] until our student demands are met” and "will begin every tour, webinar, and information session introduction with an overview of what happened on April 5th. Specifically, we will make it clear that this institution suppresses student voices.”

Also on Monday, Pomona faculty met to vote on a resolution created by several faculty members regarding the arrests. According to The Student Life, the campus newspaper, the meeting was centered around a resolution that condemned Starr’s handling of the demonstration and called for the removal of the suspensions on arrested students. Faculty are expected to reconvene later in the week to finish the discussion and to vote on the resolution.

At Columbia, students identified as participants in the “Resistance 101” meeting were dismissed from their campus housing on Wednesday and given 24 hours to vacate, according to the campus newspaper, the Columbia Spectator.

Columbia conducted an investigation into the meeting using an outside firm, university President Minouche Shafik said in a statement, and charged the four students found to have participated in the event with violating campus policies, endangerment, disruptive behavior, among other charges, according to the Spectator.

“On March 24, an event took place at a campus residential facility that the University had already barred, twice, from occurring. It featured speakers who are known to support terrorism and promote violence,” Shafik said in a statement. "I want to state for the record that this event is an abhorrent breach of our values."

Shafik, as well as Columbia’s board chairs, are slated to testify next week at a congressional hearing on campus antisemitism. The suspensions were a contrast from several other “unauthorized” events that were allowed to take place with little response from the administration. While the groups Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace remain suspended as official student groups, neither organization has ceased organizing on-campus events.

According to witnesses, some of the unauthorized events by the anti-Israel groups have included holding protests featuring chants of “Intifada, Intifada, long live the Intifada” and “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.” Deans have done nothing to stop the events the school claimed were canceled, students on campus told JI in December.

Vanderbilt is among several universities that have traditionally been quiet regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but are suddenly seeing their first-ever anti-Israel activity, including Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaigns, in the months after the Oct. 7 terror attacks and the start of Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza.

The late March demonstration, organized by the Vanderbilt Divest Coalition, was a response to the administration's move to quash a first-time BDS referendum, scheduled to take place in March; administrators said that a boycott of Israel would violate Tennessee state law and jeopardize the state and federal funding the school receives. All of the protest participants who breached the building will be placed on interim suspension, a Vanderbilt spokesperson told JI at the time.

“It’s too soon to tell whether the way these university administrators handled these situations is an indication of a strong trend, but their responses are certainly encouraging,” Miriam Elman, executive director of the Academic Engagement Network, told JI.

“Clearly conveying and enforcing reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions on student protests and demonstrations is sound policy and practice,” she continued. “These measures are critical and will greatly improve the campus climate for everyone. This applies also to the suspension of student organizations that disobey the rules.”

Elman said that university leaders are “typically hesitant to weigh in on student speech and free expression.”

“But given the egregiousness of recent incidents and conduct, including students blocking access to and commandeering school buildings and disrupting events and normal university operations, they really have no choice,” she continued.

James Pasch, the Anti-Defamation League's senior director of national litigation, called it "refreshing to see some college presidents stepping up to enforce campus policies."

"It is incumbent on all university administrators to put an end to the escalation of antisemitic discrimination and harassment on their campuses," he told JI, adding that, “one vital way to do that is to implement robust enforcement of applicable campus rules and policies, including but not limited to the Code of Student Conduct and University Space Rules for antisemitic harassment, demonstrations, and signage on campus."

The ICC’s Baime, while hailing the moves by the three universities, said, “The Jewish community must continue to pressure universities to protect Jewish students by enforcing their codes of conduct. While Vanderbilt’s response should be applauded, it’s not nearly enough. We must continue to press universities to stand up for what is right.”
I never talk to one another.” I saw that people [whom] I respected could say. “The first time in my life in Israel that much argument and so many debates,” he viewed. “It became the most divisive year — so sides for refusing to hear the other’s point of judicial overhaul, casting blame on both arguments last year over the government’s majority, then we tear our society apart.”

Rabbi Doron Perez, the executive chairman of the Mizrahi World Movement and a graduate of the master’s degree program, cut through the academic and political lectures and discussions with an emotional plea for unity and intra-Jewish compassion as he described the moment that he and his wife learned that their son Daniel, a platoon commander in the Israel Defense Forces, had indeed been killed while defending the Gaza border after he’d been designated as missing for months.

“The whole world is going towards extremes. In every society there’s extremists. The Jewish people have extremists. But you know where the extremists should belong? In the extremes,” Perez said. “When the extremes start setting the tone for the majority, then we tear our society apart.”

Perez recalled the protests and arguments last year over the government’s judicial overhaul, casting blame on both sides for refusing to hear the other’s point of view. “It became the most divisive year — so much argument and so many debates,” he said. “The first time in my life in Israel that I saw that people [whom] I respected could not talk to one another.”

The religious-Zionist leader also criticized parts of the global Jewish community that did not personally, specifically identify with the suffering of Israel on Oct. 7 and instead lament the loss of both Israeli and Palestinian lives equally, comparing them to the “wicked son” from the Passover Seder, who earns that description for having removed himself from the rest of the Jewish community.

“If you no longer feel part of this people, if the cry of your own people being destroyed is no different than any other human being… anybody who says they love everybody the same doesn’t know what love is,” Perez said.

“Anyone who says, ‘I don’t love my children any more than I love other children,’ doesn’t know what love is. If they don’t have a love for our people, who have been through so much together, if they’ve got no empathy for them, they’re not part of our family,” he continued.

“There has to be love for all people. Because all people are created in the image of God, and all the families of nations are all part of God’s people, and therefore there has to be love for everyone. But you have to first and foremost, with your family, your spouse, your children,” he said.

Perez began his address by discussing the moment last month when he and his family were informed that the military had determined that his son Daniel had been killed on Oct. 7, ending more than five months of uncertainty and worry that he was alive in Hamas captivity and being subjected to unimaginable horrors.

“I’ve never experienced such suffering as the 163 days of not knowing what is going on with our son. I’ve never experienced such suffering as my wife’s suffering… I felt as a father it was a little bit easier for me. It was much, much harder for my wife to compartmentalize anything,” Perez said.

“I said to my wife on the Shabbat of the shiva, ‘Shelly, how are you feeling?’ And I’ll never forget what she said. I didn’t know what she was going to say. She said to me, ‘Doron, in what world do we live that I’m feeling lighter and easier [knowing] that my son is dead? [That] on some level it’s a relief? I don’t even have to worry about him. I never had to worry about him. He didn’t suffer. He’s not suffering and he won’t suffer. I only have my own grief, but I can deal with it because it’s my loss. I can deal with my pain. I couldn’t deal with the nonstop concern about whether he’s being tortured, whether he’s eating, whether he’s sleeping. He hates the cold as well. I couldn’t deal with that. And not only I couldn’t deal with that, I didn’t know when it was going to end.’”

“Sadly, this year, the core theme of our conference was obvious based on the growing rise of antisemitic sentiment around the world, especially after the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas,” Jay Ruderman, president of the Ruderman Family Foundation, said in a statement. “We can’t side-step this issue, as it has profound implications for American Jews and will impact their future as well as the relationship between the United States and Israel.”

Giving the opening address of the conference, Galia Granot, the deputy director of the Ruderman Family Foundation’s Israel office, stressed the significance of antisemitism in the United States for Israelis as well.
“It will influence the future of American Jews, as well as the future of the relationship between American Jewry and Israel,” Granot said. “And I am telling you, it will also influence Israel — we know the power that American Jewry has in terms of Israel’s national, social and economic security.”

Granot reiterated the foundation’s long-held belief that the relationship with American Jewry is a “strategic asset of great importance for the Jewish people and the State of Israel,” and lauded American Jews’ solidarity with Israel following Oct. 7.

“We can see and feel that American Jewry is coming together for its relationship with Israel,” she said. “There are difficult challenges, there is the young generation that must be considered, but even with that, there is still the feeling of unity and shared destiny.”

The conference featured discussions about antisemitism from a number of vantage points. Tal-Or Cohen, executive director and founder of the online antisemitism tracking nonprofit CyberWell, discussed the growing prevalence of anti-Jewish rhetoric across different social media platforms before and since Oct. 7. The several dozen attendees of the conference — most of them alumni of the Ruderman Program — also discussed what constitutes antisemitic content based on the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition.

Academics from a number of backgrounds discussed antisemitic trends around the world: Pamela Nadell of American University explored America’s history of antisemitism; David Hirsh, CEO of the London Centre for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, discussed the phenomenon in Europe in recent years, particularly post-Oct. 7; and Izabella Tabarovsky, a senior adviser at the Wilson Center think tank, described the connections between Soviet-era and contemporary antisemitic anti-Zionism.

Michal Cotler-Wunsh, Israel’s special envoy for combating antisemitism, and Jerusalem Post Editor-in-Chief Zvika Klein also discussed antisemitism in the media.

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Is Biden losing his voice against rising antisemitism?

His administration is working to implement last year’s national antisemitism strategy. But the president hasn’t publicly spoken about anti-Jewish hate since February

By Gabby Deutch

Amid the wave of antisemitism that has swept American college campuses and Jewish communities since October, Jews in the United States have looked to allies to take a stand on their behalf. They’ve begged university presidents to support Jewish students. They’ve cheered lawmakers who held hearings spotlighting the troubling trends.

And now, some Jewish community advocates are asking President Joe Biden to again join the chorus of Americans condemning antisemitism.

“They absolutely recognize how heinous the surge of antisemitism is. But I’ll also say, it has been a little bit frustrating that we’ve not seen a wider and more aggressive level of action,” said Nathan Diament, executive director of public policy for the Orthodox Union.

Biden offered a clear voice against antisemitism in the weeks after the Oct. 7 Hamas terror attacks in Israel. Days after the attacks, he convened a solemn meeting of Jewish American leaders in Washington. Biden and Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff spoke about their pain after the attack, and they vowed to support Israel and work hard to confront antisemitism in the United States.

But in recent weeks, as Biden has shifted to campaign mode and focused on other issues, he has not spoken about antisemitism. Some in the Jewish community lamented that Biden didn’t mention antisemitism in his State of the Union address.

“‘They absolutely recognize how heinous the surge of antisemitism is. But I’ll also say, it has been a little bit frustrating that we’ve not seen a wider and more aggressive level of action,’ said Nathan Diament, executive director of public policy for the Orthodox Union.

Last May, the Biden administration released the first-ever national strategy to counter antisemitism. Sources close to the White House point out that the strategy is still being implemented, with new milestones hit each month. But are the mandates of a plan created prior to Oct. 7 forceful enough to respond adequately to the unprecedented wave of antisemitism that has occurred over the last six months?

Much of the ongoing work has not been publicized.
The work definitely continues,” said Dan Granot, director of government relations at the Anti-Defamation League. He said he is on the phone with officials in the Biden administration several times a week. Usually those conversations are with mid-level policy staff, who are tasked with implementing the actions in the antisemitism strategy, rather than high-profile officials.

The White House deputy communications director, Herbie Ziskend, told Jewish Insider that Biden “has acted to combat the scourge of antisemitism, including by releasing the first-ever national strategy to counter antisemitism... And we will continue to do so because as the president has made clear, silence is complicity.”

Last month, the Council of American Jewish Museums convened a gathering with support from the Biden administration to educate museum professionals about antisemitism. The ADL has recently partnered with the Department of Education and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to offer webinars to the public about how to identify antisemitism and how to report it if they witness it in the workplace. The Education Department has also opened dozens of civil rights investigations into allegations of antisemitism at universities and K-12 schools, although none of the cases have yet been resolved.

“It might not feel as robust as it felt in the immediate aftermath of October 7, when we were being called down to D.C. for meetings with administration officials every week, if not more frequently. But it feels, still, very extensive and very robust,” said Amy Spitalnick, CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. “Maybe they should more directly communicate how much has actually been done.”

The White House deputy communications director, Herbie Ziskend, told Jewish Insider that Biden “has acted to combat the scourge of antisemitism, including by releasing the first-ever national strategy to counter antisemitism.”

“Following the horrifying Hamas terrorist attacks in Israel on Oct. 7, the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust, and a dangerous surge in antisemitism in the U.S. and globally, the president and top administration officials have consistently and forcefully spoken out against antisemitism, hate and bigotry,” Ziskend continued. “And we will continue to do so because as the president has made clear, silence is complicity.” Biden has not publicly spoken about antisemitism since a February speech at the National Prayer Breakfast, where he touted his administration’s work fighting antisemitism and Islamophobia.

The Biden administration has recently sent representatives to address audiences at Jewish events. Last month, officials from the White House, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the State Department provided an update on the antisemitism national strategy to an audience at the ADL’s annual conference. In a keynote address, Attorney General Merrick Garland shared a personal story about family members who fled the Holocaust.

“Our democracy promises that all people will be protected in the exercise of their civil rights, in their freedom to worship and think as they please, and in the peaceful expression of their opinions, beliefs, and ideas,” he said. “Working to fulfill that promise is the Justice Department’s sacred responsibility.”

Some conversations between executives at Jewish organizations and high-level White House officials are taking place, but the meetings are not publicized, in contrast to a steady stream of press releases and public statements issued by the White House late last year touting similar discussions. As Israel’s war against Hamas has continued for six months and Biden’s approach to the conflict has shifted, some distance has arisen between the administration and Jewish organizations over Israel policy.

In late March, top leaders from the Jewish Federations of North America met with senior National Security Council staff. The JFNA leaders expressed concern that Biden’s increasingly critical rhetoric around Israel’s war in Gaza could lead to antisemitism in the U.S. The Wall Street Journal reported. (A JFNA spokesperson told JI the meeting was “confidential” and declined to share additional details.)

White House officials also plan to meet this week with the leadership of Agudath Israel, which represents the Haredi Jewish community in the U.S., according to a source familiar with the plans.

“I was in the room on Oct. 11 at the White House with the president, when he had his first meeting with the Jewish community, and it was very clear then and it is still very clear how deeply personal this is to him,” said Amy Spitalnick, CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. “I think it’s important for us not to lose that perspective, even as the war continues, and the inevitable public conversations around it shift to whatever the current crisis.”

Emhoff made a handful of public appearances at Jewish events early this year, including a speech to the Jewish War Veterans and a meeting in February with New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft, who also funds the Foundation to Combat Antisemitism.

Beyond Emhoff’s events and some recent Jewish community listening sessions at the Department of Education, there is “not much more,” said an executive at one major Jewish organization. Those close to the White House argue that Biden has revealed his care for the Jewish community since Oct. 7, and now community members should trust that his heart is in the right place.

“I was in the room on Oct. 11 at the White House with the president, when he had his first meeting with the Jewish community, and it was very clear then and it is still very clear how deeply personal this is to him,” Spitalnick said. “I think it’s important for us not to lose that perspective, even as the war continues, and the inevitable public conversations around it shift to whatever the current crisis.”

For the president, who is now taking on more campaign travel and gearing up for a busy election year — and the many constituencies he must try to woo to win reelection — his attention has shifted elsewhere. For many American Jews, their focus on the antisemitism crisis remains.
The Union for Reform Judaism on Tuesday became the first Jewish denomination to pass a resolution divesting its investment portfolio from fossil fuel companies.

The move, backed by the Dayenu environmental nonprofit, comes on the heels of two Jewish federations in Oregon — one in Portland and the other in Eugene — making the same commitment, a first for federations.

In making the decision, which URJ leaders said was years in the making, they cited Genesis 2:15, which says that God settled man in the Garden of Eden to “till and tend it,” noting that fossil fuels are the main drivers of climate change.

“When we act together, we can help care for the earth as Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden. And we can care for our financial health, recognizing that fossil-free portfolios over time perform equal to or slightly better than those holding fossil fuels,” Rabbi Jonah Pesner, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said in a statement.

Jennifer Brodkey Kaufman, URJ North American board chair, added: “Climate change’s impacts are being felt in communities worldwide. We have the ability and responsibility to use our dollars to make a positive difference on climate, rather than to continue funding investment in damaging fossil fuels. Through this resolution, which was crafted by the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism before being adopted by the URJ, we can build on decades of past action and advocacy on climate and socially responsible investing.”

As greenhouse gas emissions choke the Earth's atmosphere, they trap the sun's heat, resulting in global warming and climate change. Last year was the warmest year on record. In addition to harming the environment, fossil fuels pose a risk to health. Research published in 2021 from Harvard University, the University of Birmingham, the University of Leicester and University College London found that more than 8 million people died in 2018 from fossil fuel pollution — meaning that air pollution from burning fossil fuels was responsible for about 1 in 5 deaths worldwide.

Climate activism has been a cause at the forefront of the Reform movement for several decades. In a 1991 resolution, titled The Environment, URJ called for the U.S. and Canadian governments to provide “significant resources for the study of mitigation of global warming and destructive environment change.”

A 2009 resolution, Climate Change and Energy, stated: “We now face the unprecedented challenge of climate change due to greenhouse gas emissions, and the need for serious and urgent action on this issue has never been clearer.” In 2017, the Resolution on Addressing the Impacts of Climate Change stated: “What has changed since our prior statements? The urgency.”

In a December 2022 report, Dayenu, a group that mobilizes Jewish support for climate crisis action, analyzed tax filings and financial statements from the URJ as well as the leading bodies of Judaism's three other major denominations — United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Orthodox Union and Reconstructing Judaism. (It also looked at data from federations and large private Jewish foundations).

The group estimated that while Jewish institutional investment on its own would not significantly help the environment, the organizations’ investments made up one third of the $100 billion in total U.S. Jewish institutional investment. According to the report, Dayenu estimated that Jewish institutional investment in the fossil fuel industry totaled $3.3 billion.

Rabbi Jennie Rosenn, CEO and founder of Dayenu, cited the Jewish value of considering the next generation as a reason for additional Jewish groups to remove fossil fuel companies from their investment portfolios.

“We have an ever-shortening window in which to address the climate crisis, avert the worst of climate devastation, and build a just and sustainable world so that we may live – l'dor v'dor – from generation to generation,” Rosenn said in a statement. She called on “all Jewish institutions to follow the Reform movement’s leadership and make their own public commitments to move their investments out of fossil fuels and instead invest toward a just and livable clean energy future.”
A senior fellow with the Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025, an initiative organizing a future Trump administration policy platform and staffing apparatus, went against the think tank’s position on TikTok by claiming in a CNBC interview that there is “no evidence” of Chinese censorship on the app and dismissing national security concerns as folly.

John McEntee, a former Trump administration official, acknowledged at the beginning of his CNBC interview on Tuesday that he has grown his business, a dating app for conservatives called The Right Stuff, through TikTok “more than anything,” though he goes on to claim throughout the interview that this does not cloud his thinking on the matter.

“That’s not why I’m against the bill. I’m against the bill because it’s new censorship power for the government,” McEntee said during a “Squawk Box” appearance, referring to the House legislation banning the app.

“The only two things they say are Chinese propaganda – which no one has ever seen, there’s been no instance of that – or American user data. But American user data, it’s all stored in America with Oracle, an American company,” McEntee added when asked about the national security implications of leaving TikTok unregulated.

“It’s incredibly powerful, and that’s why they [Congress] want to ban it. It’s news and a narrative they can’t control. It has nothing to do with China. The Chinese government doesn’t own TikTok, ByteDance does. That’s not even a Chinese company, that’s a global company.”

Asked about concerns over TikTok’s algorithm from a sizable bipartisan majority in Congress, including leading conservatives such as Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX), McEntee denied that either are a problem.

“The TikTok algorithm feeds you things off of your own interests. It doesn’t promote anything. It doesn’t put out its own content. Creators create things, they share videos. Hard stop,” McEntee said. “It’s a younger audience, which is why [baby] boomers have a hard time understanding this.”

McEntee also dismissed concerns that the app is feeding antisemitic and anti-Israel content to its young base of subscribers, arguing that it only reflects the anti-Israel views of Gen Z Americans.

“Why is there less pro-Israel content? Well, the younger generation is less pro-Israel, that might be good or bad or whatever, but it’s just feeding American public opinion,” McEntee continued. “No one’s actually like promoting or censoring Uighur content, it’s just not a top-of-mind issue for most Americans. That’s why you don’t see it.”

A Heritage Foundation spokesperson declined to comment to Jewish Insider on McEntee’s claims about TikTok, despite the conservative think tank openly backing the effort to regulate the social media app and being vocal about the national security threats posed by the company and its technology.

Kara Frederick, the director of Heritage’s Tech Policy Center, said last month that “TikTok is so in bed with Communist China that it seems reticent to reach for the clean divestment option this legislation gives the company. This should tell you all you need to know about the grip the CCP has on TikTok.”

A Trump campaign spokesperson did not respond to JI’s request for comment on the matter either. Former President Donald Trump has criticized the House legislation banning TikTok if the platform is not sold to a company without ties to the Chinese Communist Party, arguing it would benefit Meta and other competing companies.

At the end of his presidency, Trump attempted to ban TikTok before a court blocked the effort.

Heritage’s Asian Studies Center published a commentary piece last month noting the think tank’s “long track record of warning about the threats TikTok poses to Americans.” The group mentions senior Heritage Fellow Mike Gonzalez’s 2019 warnings about China’s attempts to manipulate public opinion in the U.S. through several avenues, including media.
The effort to document the events of Oct. 7 for posterity — and against the deniers

Historians and librarians collect documents, artifacts and even WhatsApp messages to preserve the historic events

By Lahav Harkov

If journalists are writing, as Washington Post publisher Philip Graham once put it, “the first rough draft of history” about Oct. 7, the foundations for the later drafts are being prepared by historians, archivists, librarians and others — many of whom attended a conference at the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem on Sunday, the six-month anniversary of Hamas’ invasion of southwestern Israel.

The topic of “Telling War: The conference for documenting Oct. 7 and the war that broke out in its wake” focused on initiatives to collect testimony and preserve artifacts. But the topic of authenticating the massive collection amassed by the library’s staff and representatives of over 180 documentation initiatives loomed large amid the wave of atrocity denial that has grown online and in some corners of the news media.

Former IDF spokesman Ronen Manelis, who was involved in creating and screening a compilation of footage of Oct. 7 atrocities, lamented onstage that “there were Israeli spokespeople who spoke about events for which we do not have documentation, and that hurt our legitimacy. That created difficulties.”

As of this week, over 15,000 people have seen the footage in 650 screenings in 60 countries. Some people who see the 47-minute film that the IDF and Israeli embassies abroad have screened for limited, influential audiences such as members of Congress and figures in Hollywood, ask why specific crimes or situations are not shown, Manelis said.

“When it comes to sexual violence, we have more stories than solid proof, and that is part of the difficulty,” he said.

The lack of proof does not necessarily mean they didn’t happen, he pointed out: “Not everything can be documented, which should be understandable in light of the circumstances, but it bothers some people, and that is one of the challenges.”

Cochav Elkayam-Levy, the founder of the Civil Commission on Oct. 7 Crimes by Hamas against Women and Children and recipient of this year’s Israel Prize for Solidarity, has been dogged by accusations made by those who deny Hamas’ sexual violence.

Speaking at the conference, she said that from the outset, she “warned to reach the highest standards of documentation. At the time, I didn’t know what it meant, but I’m glad I aimed for that standard.”

Elkayam-Levy said that in addition to attacks on her credibility, anti-Israel elements abroad have tried to cyberattack the Civil Commission, and she is working with former Shin Bet officers on securing her systems.

Raquel Ukeles, the National Library’s head of collections who is spearheading its Oct. 7 documentation collection efforts, lamented to Jewish Insider that “libraries don’t traditionally authenticate material, but this has come up again and again.”

Ukeles suggested that one way to demonstrate the authenticity of a story is to use “not one video but 20 sources” describing the same event.

In addition, the library is in talks with potential partners in the tech sector who could check the authenticity of videos, the medium that Ukeles said is most vulnerable to tampering.

Or Rappel-Kroyzer, a historian working on Tel Aviv University’s Oct. 7 archive, also said that he is working on a technological response to the question, “The materials you collected are nice, but how do we know that it’s not AI?”

“Part of what we do is use a system that uses blockchain to put a time stamp on materials and document them,” he said.

Israeli photojournalist Ziv Koren lamented during a panel the ability for “anyone, without any supervision, [to] upload any content they want. We can’t trust what we see.”

At the same time, Koren posited that if there was one iconic, powerful photo of Oct. 7, such an image would stay in people’s minds and be harder to deny — and blamed Israelis for being too squeamish to publish gruesome images.

“The other side doesn’t cover the bodies until there was a photographer, and on our side, they don’t bring a photographer until the bodies are covered,” Koren said. “We hurt ourselves with our outsized care for the dignity of the dead. The media became very conservative…We have no photo that is powerful enough…No one had the balls to put a photo on the front page that stops your breath.”

“If there is no visual that is powerful enough, it’s easier to deny, because there are such difficult photos from Gaza,” he added.

Much of the conference focused on the myriad initiatives and organizations that the National Library is coordinating into one database of information and documentation of the events of Oct. 7 and beyond.

Participants included kibbutz archivists and historians who normally centered their role around telling the story of their agricultural communes’ establishment or managing the “nostalgia bungalow” in Be’eri with artifacts of how the kibbutzniks lived decades ago, and since oct. 7 found themselves documenting a massacre and an arson attack. Experts in visual history,
collecting and cataloging objects from decades, centuries and even millennia ago, began doing that for some of the over 3,000 artifacts gathered from the attack that took place six months ago. Government employees tasked with declaring sites around the country to be of historic value considered what sites to dedicate to the memory of what recently happened, and where to let life in the western Negev move on.

As National Library Director-General Oren Weinberg put it: “Unlike everything we dealt with in this library to this day, we aren’t looking at history from a distance. This impacts our lives every day.”

The library’s documentation efforts began on Oct. 9, when its staff “knew that one of the main things that needed to be done is to document, preserve and make accessible…and ensure sustainability” of the evidence of what happened in the previous days, Weinberg said.

Ukeles, who spearheaded the effort, told JI that she viewed the collection and preservation of documentation from Oct. 7 and beyond as part of the library’s “core mission to collect and preserve and make available Israeli and Jewish culture and history.”

She and 10 other library employees “put aside most of what we do to work full-time on this archive.”

“The first job,” Ukeles recounted, “was to download material from the internet. From our experience archiving the Israeli and Jewish internet for over a decade, we knew how ephemeral it was...much more than a book.”

The library reached out to more than 180 individuals and organizations involved in documentation to coordinate and streamline their efforts, as well as prepare a joint archive coordinated by the library.

Ukeles said the library’s project “is very much collaborative...We are working with all of the cultural heritage organizations who chose to join forces so there will be one place for people looking for materials. If you’re looking for what happened in Kfar Aza or [for example] to the Lifshitz family, it will all be documented and can be searched.”

Shira Shapira works for the Israeli Heritage Ministry and is involved in its project to memorialize the events of Oct. 7 and set up “heritage spaces,” or historic sites.

“The whole [western Negev] has to be a heritage space that has to tell a variety of stories,” Shapira said.

Toward that end, the Heritage Ministry and its partners have collected objects and eyewitness accounts. They are working on a way to preserve the many burnt cars left at the sites of the attack for a kind of memorial or exhibit. The ministry is using photogrammetry, the science of making measurements through pictures, to compare the damage to structures in the kibbutzim near the Gaza border to what was there before, and in addition to using it for memorialization, it has sent some of its findings to the International Court of Justice in The Hague. They have also mapped out the kibbutzim with notation of where and what was damaged, and which sites were considered historic before October 2023.

Shapira is also the mother of Aner Shapira, who caught and threw back seven grenades that Hamas terrorists lobbed into a bomb shelter near the Nova music festival, before the eighth exploded, killing him.

Six months later, Shapira said she “glad, if I can say that, to mark this morning with [conference attendees] and think about the national mission that we are all a part of. We have to understand that we have a job to do, to preserve and tell these stories to ourselves and the world.”

Shapira spoke about how memorializing the events "plays an important role in our resilience," in striking a balance between remembering the events and the need to try to return to regular life.

Similarly, Ukeles said that, through the act of documenting Oct. 7, she “hope[s] to create space in our consciousness for healing.”

Yaniv Hagi, a resident of Kibbutz Be’eri, launched Memory 710 with the hope of empowering residents of the western Negev.

The organization, which is working with the National Library, has been collecting WhatsApp messages — text, audio, photos and video — sent by residents of the Gaza border communities on Oct. 7, to try to tell the full story of what happened in the kibbutzim and towns that day.

“On Oct. 8 or 9, I found myself...on a mattress on the floor with all five members of my family, who all got out alive,” Hagi told conference attendees. “I had an idea. I imagined my grandson who was not born yet visiting a museum...He chooses our house, and could see everything that happened that day through our WhatsApp messages and the videos we filmed.”

Hagi realized that their phones had “documentation of what exactly happened, minute after minute. Through voice notes, you could hear things that happened with the local security volunteers and know exactly what happened by cross-referencing them with text messages.” Those messages also tell the story more powerfully, he argued: “It’s the difference between me telling you that I was in the safe room and I was afraid, and reading my message that said ‘I am afraid’ in that moment in the safe room.”

Hagi displayed screenshots from the phones of a husband and wife. On the wife’s phone, she says she is in the safe room with her children asking her husband what to do. He suggests that she barricade the door with furniture, and she sends a photo. On the husband’s phone is a WhatsApp group for the kibbutz’s security team, of which he was a volunteer member, with people telling each other where to go to help. At the bottom of the screen was a message that was never sent: “Call the army urgently.”

“He left to defend his home and was killed,” Hagi said.

Hagi also seeks to empower residents of towns ravaged by the Hamas attack on Oct. 7 to tell their own story: “It’s part of our resilience. Memory 710 is made up mostly of people from the western Negev, which is very important to us...Do we have a narrative of victimhood, or of helping one another? I want to put the spotlight on stories where people help each other.”

He gave his own experience as an example: His family was evacuated from the kibbutz by settlers from Otniel who traveled from the West Bank to the Gaza border area to save people without being called up by the IDF. He displayed a photo of his family sleeping on the floor of a gym in Netivot, “the city of the Babas,” as Hagi called it, referring to the Moroccan kabbalists who lived there, “the farthest thing from left-wing Be’eri and food.”
Hagi and his team are still working to collect the WhatsApp messages. After that, they plan to read them all and catalog them. Ultimately, he hopes to have “results” that can be provided to everyone who took part, such as “an empowering story or a work of art.”

Koren, the photojournalist, drove to the Gaza border on Oct. 7 and has entered Gaza at least once a week since the start of the IDF’s ground incursion.

He filmed the moment he arrived in Sderot that morning and saw people shot dead in the street; behind the camera, at a loss for words, he said “oy vavoy” (a Yiddish expression of dismay) again and again.

In another video Koren filmed while lying on the ground, ducking behind his car on the side of a road, gunshots can be heard nonstop. He and a colleague don’t know where it’s coming from. Then, suddenly, about six IDF soldiers arrive and duck behind a concrete barrier on the road and start shooting over their heads. Eventually, he and the other photographers with him get back in the car and drive away. “Hit the gas, faster, faster,” Koren says.

He showed conference participants photos he took of the Oct. 7 attack and its aftermath, which the Foreign Ministry has been exhibiting around the world, including one of “soldiers who fought for 40-50 hours straight and one started crying after seeing challahs and wine still on a table from the [Simchat Torah] holiday.”

“We didn't really understand what was happening,” Koren said. “It didn't end on Oct. 7... Every day there is a story. The hardest thing is that there are 10 things at once and knowing what to do first... The documentation hasn’t stopped to this day... Evacuees, funerals, it’s endless.”

Koren took issue with the fact that the IDF, police and other government bodies send out their own photos and do not allow journalists into combat zones, saying that the practice ultimately hurts Israel.

“People whose job it is to be objective and report the truth are seen less and less in the field because these bodies have their own interests,” Koren lamented. “I take photos for local and international media and for exhibits, and I want as many people to be exposed to these photos, especially because we see the hasbara that — to put it delicately — is not exactly doing the job, and we are losing our legitimacy.”

Reports that the IDF withdrew one of its top commando divisions from the Gaza Strip on Sunday sent shockwaves through some parts of Israeli society, which viewed the pullback as a capitulation to U.S. diplomatic pressure on Israel to start winding down the six-month-old war.

Others, particularly those in the military and defense establishment, insisted, however, that the move is purely tactical, with the army planning to fight Hamas in a more strategic way using intelligence and smaller, specialized units. Israel’s leaders from both the political and military spheres have also asserted that their plans to tackle and eliminate the terror group’s remaining six battalions – said to be in central and southern Gaza – will most definitely go ahead.

The conflicting analysis of this clear shift in Israel’s military strategy – vastly cutting back on the number of boots on the ground before Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s vowed “total victory” has been achieved – comes amid reports on Monday from Cairo of progress in mediated talks for a cease-fire and a hostage release.

They also come after a tense phone call last Thursday between Netanyahu and President Joe Biden, the latter of whom reportedly put pressure on the Israeli leader to increase the amount of humanitarian aid entering Gaza, open up more land crossings into the Strip and allow Israeli mediators more leeway in cease-fire negotiations.

“It doesn't make sense from a tactical, strategic or operational point of view,” Eyal Pinko, a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar Ilan University near...
Tel Aviv, told Jewish Insider. “Israel is really feeling the pressure from Biden,” Pinko said, adding, however, that “it cannot not allow itself to do something in Rafah.

Eyal Pinko, a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar Ilan University near Tel Aviv, told Jewish Insider on Monday that the cutting back of troops inside an active combat zone was “unexpected” and “not a reasonable war principle.”

“It doesn't make sense from a tactical, strategic or operational point of view,” Pinko, a retired Israeli navy commander who also served in the country's intelligence agency for more than 30 years, said. He put the move down to international pressure.

“Israel is really feeling the pressure from Biden,” Pinko said, adding, however, that “it cannot not allow itself to do something in Rafah.

“All the senior [Hamas] officers are there and probably most of the hostages, both dead and alive,” Pinko said of Gaza's southern most city, where some 1.4 million Gazans displaced by months of intense fighting are also sheltering, further complicating any plans for a military operation.

“The only way to bring some kind of victory from the Israeli perspective is to go into Rafah, but after six months of war maybe the IDF really does need to restore its troops,” he said.

In an analysis on Monday, Times of Israel Editor-in-Chief David Horovitz pointed out how the reduction of troops inside Gaza – from 30-40,000 at the height of the offensive to only a few thousand today – seemed to contradict Netanyahu's repeated calls for “total victory,” as well as the prime minister's recent statements that victory was imminent.

Horovitz also put the shift down to the change in tone by the U.S. administration and suggested that it was possible the embattled prime minister has recognized that “Israel cannot wage war against Hamas without the diplomatic and practical support of its main ally and weapons supplier.”

“When you've degraded the capability of Hamas to operate as an organized force, then the type of operations you need to carry out are different and the operation shifts to a lower intensity, more intelligence guided operation with limited forces but with maximum impact,” IDF spokesman Lt. Col. (res.) Peter Lerner told JI.

 “[U].S. President Joe Biden and his key officials have made crystal clear in recent weeks that they don't believe the IDF has a viable plan to target Hamas while protecting the million-plus Gazans sheltering in the Rafah area, and thus will not support a major offensive there,” Horovitz added.

A source familiar with Netanyahu's thinking told JI that both diplomatic pressure and military strategy were involved in the changing tactics. The withdrawal of troops is primarily about creating conditions for some kind of cease-fire, and also about calming down the Americans, as well as showing that Israel is respecting the Muslim Eid al Fitr holiday and giving the army a break in order to prepare its forces to eventually enter Rafah, the source said.

IDF spokesman Lt. Col. (res.) Peter Lerner told JI that the situation on the ground had changed in recent weeks, that the forces withdrawn over the weekend had completed their mission in Gaza and the army was now regrouping in preparation for future operations.

“When you've degraded the capability of Hamas to operate as an organized force, then the type of operations you need to carry out are different and the operation shifts to a lower intensity, more intelligence guided operation with limited forces but with maximum impact,” Lerner said, explaining that the unit that left Gaza on Sunday belonged to the army's 98th Division and had been battling in the southern Gaza town of Khan Younis for the past few months.

“They went through all the different neighborhoods, revealed the tunnel system, engaged with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad terrorists wherever they were and dismantled Hamas’ ability to operate,” he said. “That is why they were brought out.”

“Most of the heavy forces were sent out [of Gaza] because the type of needs and the type of threats are now different,” Itamar Yaar, a former deputy head of Israel's National Security Council, said. “If you are a military commander, you need to be aware of all the circumstances and keep in mind what your mission is. Leaving troops on the ground just to have them there is not a good reason to stay.”

The division, he continued, was now “refreshing themselves” and would go through some further training in preparation for future missions. Troops from the Nahal Brigade have remained on the ground in Gaza, Lerner said.

Asked what would stop Hamas and other militant groups from returning to the area if the army is no longer there, the spokesman highlighted the recent two-week battle at Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City. The IDF initially entered the medical compound in November, but after clearing the premises, thousands of terrorists returned, admitting in interrogations that it was the safest place for them to hide, believing the army would not return to the hospital due to international criticism. The army, however, carried out a special precision operation in which it captured and killed hundreds of fighters.

Itamar Yaar, a former deputy head of Israel's National Security Council, said the operation at Al-Shifa Hospital was a powerful warning to Hamas that the IDF would return to Gaza when and where it is needed.

Yaar, who serves as the CEO of Commanders for Israeli Security, an organization of some 550 ex-senior security officials, said that the military's top commanders had to take into consideration a broad range of elements, including activities on the ground and intelligence information, when determining military strategy. He also said the army could easily send troops back into Gaza for special operations as needed.

“Most of the heavy forces were sent out [of Gaza] because the type of needs and the type of threats are now different,” Yaar said. “If you are a military commander, you need to be aware of all the circumstances and keep in mind what your mission is. Leaving troops on the ground just to have them there is not a good reason to stay.”

He also said that last week's accidental strike on a World Central Kitchen convoy,
which killed seven aid workers, as well as diplomatic matters, including the negotiations in Egypt, had an impact on the IDF’s actions in Gaza. Yaar said that the confluence of issues was “delaying dramatically any big operation the Israeli forces might carry out in Rafah.”

He also noted the increasing threats from Iran — and its proxies in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq — this week, saying, “pulling Division 98 out of Gaza is the best sign that Israel is preparing itself for an operation in other areas, including Lebanon.”

Brig. Gen. (retired) Amir Avivi, CEO of the Israel Defense and Security Forum, also said that pulling out the 98th Division at this stage made sense but reiterated that Israel could not achieve victory in this war and restore security in Israel’s south unless it completely destroyed all of Hamas’ capabilities, including taking control of Rafah.

He said the army was just changing its mode of operation now that the forces operating in Khan Younis had destroyed Hamas’ military infrastructure there. Avivi also said he believed the focus would be on more pinpointed raids based on accurate intelligence.

“Leaving troops inside Khan Younis at this stage would be more of a threat than an advantage,” he said, explaining that they would become targets for individual terrorists who might still be lurking in the area.

Avivi, a former brigadier general in the IDF’s engineering corps and previously responsible for the Gaza area, also said he believed that the 98th Division needed to be refreshed in order to help them better prepare for entering Rafah, which he predicted will most certainly happen.

“Not going into Rafah means losing the war,” Avivi emphasized, adding that stopping the fighting now will not really end the war — as the U.S. administration hopes — because it will enable Hamas to build-up its forces and stay in power.

Senior Political Correspondent Lahav Harkov contributed to this report.

Larry Hogan: Democrats will lose Jewish voters due to White House pressure on Israel

The former Maryland governor criticized President Joe Biden’s shift on Israel in an interview with JI

By Emily Jacobs

Former Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan told Jewish Insider on Sunday that he’s “very concerned” about backsliding support for Israel among Democrats, accusing the Biden administration and Democratic lawmakers of caving to “pressure from the far-left base of their party” at the expense of “an awful lot of Jewish support.”

Hogan sat down with JI on Sunday at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Baltimore’s annual block party, where he huddled with Jewish leaders to mark six months since the Oct. 7 Hamas terror attacks and spoke with locals about his Senate bid. In an interview during the event, Hogan said that one of his leading policy priorities in the Senate “is being a champion for Israel” amid waning support from the Democratic Party.

“I’m very concerned about it. When you have people like one of our senators here in Maryland, Chris Van Hollen, and Chuck Schumer taking positions that I never would have imagined,” Hogan told JI. “I’m concerned about the rise in antisemitism and I’m concerned about what were traditionally good allies and supporters turning their backs [on them] because of pressure from the far-left base of their party. It’s very frustrating, and I think it’s a mistake.”

The GOP Senate hopeful was referring to Van Hollen’s recent threats to condition aid to Israel amid continued criticism of Israel’s handling of the war in Gaza and Schumer’s call for new elections in Israel in a speech that grouped Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu together with Hamas as obstacles to peace.

Hogan, a Republican who served two terms as governor of deep blue Maryland, argued that President Joe Biden’s escalating rhetoric on Israel could hurt him in November amid the tone shift that has been seen as an effort to shore up Arab-American support.

“I think he’s definitely feeling the pressure. There’s stories about people in the White House screaming at each other and everywhere they go they have protesters yelling at them. They’re definitely reacting, which is what they usually do. They cave to pressure, they show weakness,” Hogan said.

“But it’s not really about [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu or his actions. We’ve got to support our most important ally, and it’s a democracy that
gets to decide who their leaders are and what they do and what actions they take,” he continued. “I think it’s going to hurt him drastically. I mean, he’s caving to the pressure from the Palestinian community because he was losing votes in Michigan, but he’s losing an awful lot of Jewish support now.”

Hogan is running for the seat of retiring Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD). The vacancy, Hogan’s name recognition and high approval ratings in the state have made the race competitive, despite Maryland’s substantial Democratic edge. He’ll either face off in the general election against Rep. David Trone (D-MD) or Prince George’s County Executive Angela Alsobrooks.

“I don’t know what the numbers are in Michigan, but throughout the rest of the country, like Van Hollen, I don’t understand it at all. In Maryland we have a large Jewish population, he’s abandoned them,” Hogan said. “Trone is also walking back. He used to be a pretty good supporter, but now he’s calling for unilateral, immediate cease-fires and cutting off aid to Israel. So I’m gonna continue to stand firm, it’s where I’ve always been. I think it’s the right place to be, and I think the people we’re talking to today recognize that and appreciate that.”

Reached by JI, Van Hollen said in a statement that, “You can be a good friend and strong supporter of the people of Israel — as I am — and not support giving a blank check to Netanyahu and his far-right, extremist coalition. It’s not what the American people want, and it’s not what Marylanders want.”

Since Hogan entered the Senate race, Democrats have accused the former two-term governor of being out of step with Maryland’s liberal electorate. Cardin said in comments published on Sunday that he did not believe Hogan would be able to win on the same ballot as former President Donald Trump, despite the former governor being an outspoken critic of the former president.

“I don’t think it’s gonna make any difference at all because I think they recognize the fact that he will organize with the Republicans,” Cardin told CNN in February. “So there will be another voice for the Republicans and allow the extreme agenda.”

As asked about those comments, a Hogan campaign spokesperson said, “Governor Hogan looks forward to building on Senator Cardin’s legacy of supporting Israel in the Senate, where he will serve as a voice for all Marylanders.”

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