If anyone thought Jordan’s part in intercepting drones Iran launched at Israel on the weekend marked a turning point in the Hashemite Kingdom’s relations with the Jewish state, Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi immediately tried to dispel that notion, insisting in media interviews that Israel was still the real problem.

Leading figures in Jordan have for months been leveling harsh criticism on Israel and Amman called off an energy and water deal in response to the war in Gaza, amid pressure from a population that has largely been unsupportive of relations between the countries since they signed an agreement in 1994.

But the Iranian assault, with projectiles flying over Jordanian territory, marked a point where Amman was working in its own interest, which overlapped with Jerusalem’s, rather than Jordan jumping to Israel’s rescue, experts said.

Iran has long worked to gain a foothold in Jordan and undermine the stability of its monarchy. Israel’s 300 km-border with Jordan is its longest frontier, such that a stronger Iranian or Iran-backed presence would pose a serious threat to the Jewish state.

Yet Israel, Eyal Pinko, senior research fellow at Bar-Ilan University’s BESA Center of Strategic Studies said, is “only one player on the chessboard...in the war within Islam, between the Shi’ite countries led by Iran and the Sunni countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, Jordan and Morocco.”

Former Deputy Ambassador to Egypt Ruth Wasserman Lande, a fellow at the Misgav Institute for National Security, told Jewish Insider that in recent years Iran “found graves of all kinds of Shi’ite sheikhs on the Israel-Jordan border, told the Jordanians they must come and take care of the graves, and suddenly there was an Iranian presence in Jordan.”

Those graves began a “slow encroachment” that characterizes Iran’s behavior around the region, Wasserman Lande said. Jordan remained silent for years,
even when Iran-supported Hamas tried to compete with the Kingdom over primacy at holy sites in Jerusalem, and as Iran and its proxy Hezbollah smuggled weapons and drugs through Jordan.

Iran has been trying to "shuffle the cards inside Jordan" by inciting Palestinians in Jordan via social media, Pinko noted in a briefing to the Jerusalem Press Club this week.

Hussain Abdul-Hussain, a research fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, told JI that "this is about Jordan itself before it's about Israel. The sovereignty of Jordan is at stake...Jordan is aware their sovereignty is really precious. This means any kind of infringement on their sovereignty, big or small, will be fought...This happens to align with Israeli interests."

As such, the palace's readout of the king's call with President Joe Biden on Sunday said that "His Majesty affirmed that Jordan will not allow for a regional war to unfold on its land." The statement made no reference to Iran or intercepting the projectiles it launched, but said the call "covered the latest developments in the region and efforts to de-escalate and reach a ceasefire in Gaza."

Safadi told CNN: "Whatever objects that go into our skies, violate our airspace, that we believe pose a danger to Jordan, we will do whatever within our means to end that threat and that's what we did... Our priority is to protect Jordan and Jordanian citizens."

Rather than pin the issue on Iran, Safadi said that "the cause of all this tension...is the Israeli aggression of Gaza and the continued absence of a political horizon."

Abdul-Hussein called Safadi's remarks "horrible" and said they "didn't even add up."

"He said the Iranian attack happened because there's no political horizon in Palestine — that's really dumb, because now he's putting Jordan in the way of a political horizon in Palestine," Abdul-Hussein said. "If you think the absence of a political horizon justifies the Iranian attack, then why stand against it?"

These kinds of statements are "divorced from actual policies," Abdul-Hussein added. Safadi can't admit to cooperation with Israel, because of "anger on the street," where most of the Jordanian population identifies as Palestinian, and "terrible incitement in education in Jordan," Wasserman Lande said.

"Even though the king talks about east Jerusalem and Gaza in the media," Pinko said, "he is afraid of what is happening inside his country. But you only see that below the [surface]."

Former Deputy Ambassador to Egypt Ruth Wasserman Lande, a fellow at the Misgav Institute for National Security, saw Jordan's part in thwarting the Iranian attack as "a turning point in [Israel and Jordan's] cooperation against Iran, because the [Jordanian] government is at a boiling point when it comes to its own survival," which she said "depends on other countries, first and foremost Israel and the U.S."

Jordan also faced harsh criticism beyond its own borders, as well, with one Al Jazeera executive writing: "There are Arab citizens who pull the trigger to protect Israel and watch when the Palestinians are bombed. A new and shocking scene." One meme that made the rounds on X, formerly Twitter, showed King Abdullah II in an IDF general's uniform.

An Israeli official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said that Jerusalem was very encouraged by Amman being part of the coalition against Iran, and an effective one at that.

However, the official said, Israel has kept quiet about it because of the intense pressures the monarchy is facing.

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Pinko said that cooperation between Israel and Jordan in the military and intelligence spheres is "very strong," but posited that Washington pressured King Abdullah to help Israel in this case, noting that "Jordan pretty much depends on the U.S. and most of the Jordanian military equipment and platforms are Americans."
New Haggadot, supplemental readings and initiatives look to bring the global state of affairs into this year’s Passover Seder

Organizations and individuals offer thoughts and commentaries as Jews around the world look to navigate a Passover in which over 100 captives remain in bondage

By Jay Deitcher

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

A hostage poster set upright on a chair at the table. A blooming flower added to the Seder plate. A poem by the mother of one of the captives. As more than 100 people languish in captivity in Gaza and rising numbers of Jews around the world report hiding their identities in public due to rising antisemitism, this year’s Passover Seder — with its focus on liberation and freedom — is sure to be different from all other Seders.

To bring the global state of affairs into this year’s Seder, Jewish and Israeli organizations, as well as individual authors, are offering new Haggadot, supplemental readings and recommended practices.

“When we say next year in Jerusalem... we want to say it with the conviction that those who are captive might be returned to their families,” Liz P.G. Hirsch, the executive director of Women of Reform Judaism, told eJewishPhilanthropy.

Her organization created a Haggadah insert with a prayer for captive women.

“The mission statement of the Haggadah is the line ‘B’chol dor vador chayav adam lir’ot et atzmo k’ilu hu hatza mimitzrayim,’ — ‘In every generation, we should see ourselves as someone who personally experienced the Exodus from Egypt.’” Hirsch said. “And this prayer is an opportunity for us to feel that deep empathy and express the pain and the connection that we have to those who are captive.”

Keeping the hostages in mind is essential at all times of the year for the Board of Deputies of British Jews, Michael Wegier, the group’s chief executive, told eJP. Since Oct. 7, the board has held regular vigils outside the House of Parliament showing its support for the hostages. This Passover, it is asking the community to provide a “Seder Seat for a Hostage,” placing a hostage poster in their place.

“We don’t want to dampen people’s joyous celebration,” Wegier said. “It’s a mitzvah to celebrate Pesach, but nor could we go ahead as if it was any other year. We thought having an empty seat at the Seder dedicated to a hostage was a very appropriate way of keeping people’s minds focused on the hostage situation, whilst nevertheless continuing to celebrate Pesach with their family and friends and guests.”

Wegier hopes the seat prompts conversations about how folks could do more as individuals and as a community to keep the hostages in the public eye.

Similarly, other Jewish organizations around the world have created traditions to honor the hostages this year. The Hostages and Missing Families Forum created a Haggadah that was produced at the printing press on Kibbutz Be’eri, one of the hardest-hit communities in the Oct. 7 attacks, which has 20 residents in captivity. (The print edition in English is sold out, but a digital version is still available.)

The forum’s Haggadah includes the standard liturgy as well as essays and commentary related to the war and the hostages from — among others — Miriam Peretz, an Israeli educator and Israel Prize winner, who had two sons who were killed in combat, one of them two days before Passover. In her essay, Peretz recalls that year’s Seder almost immediately after the funeral with her son’s four children, who sang Mah Nishtana (Why is this night different from all other nights?). “Despite it all, we celebrated the Seder. We cried and sang with them in deep pain and continued reading in the Haggadah to the commandment, ‘I will not die for I will live,’” Peretz wrote.

The Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks-Herenstein Center for Values and Leadership at Yeshiva University offers an insert based on the hope that people can make meaningful changes to improve the world, even during dark times like today. It includes prompts to empower attendees by recognizing ways that struggles have helped them grow and ways their actions have improved the world.

The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles also created an insert acknowledging the hostages through poetry and new traditions including adding a date — a fruit that symbolizes resilience — to the Seder plate and opening the door for the hostages, similar to how Jews open it for Elijah.

Jews around the world performing similar new traditions is a powerful gesture, Mary Kohav, vice president of Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and Community Engagement at the L.A. federation, told eJP, “We find strength in our unity.”

Jewish Women International and Seed the Dream Foundation are asking people to put a flower on their Seder plate as a way to stand in solidarity with not just the hostages, but all Israeli women who suffered due to terrorism.

Meanwhile, many are adding prayers for peace and safety to their Seders, Eileen Levinson, the executive director of Recustom, an organization that brings a do-it-yourself view to Jewish traditions, told eJP.
Recustom, through its site Haggadot.com, allows users to pick and choose from over 100,000 Haggadah clips created by individuals and organizations to create their own Haggadah. One popular new supplement was created by the Reform movement’s Central Conference of American Rabbis offering prayers for the return of captives, for soldiers and for the dignity and security of innocent lives.

In the past, new entries on Haggadot.com were uploaded to the site publicly by default, but this year, they began making them automatically private, Levinson said, because users are celebrating more intimately this year.

“Our opinions vary so much,” Levinson said. “People are thinking more about what are they doing in their own Seder, versus what they’re going to share out with the huge audience of Haggadot.com.”

Even as Jews look more towards our immediate communities and families, they are in “a global Jewish crisis,” according to Tracy Frydberg, the director of the Tisch Center for Jewish Dialogue at ANU: The Museum of the Jewish People. To counteract that, they should look for inspiration in family stories, said Frydberg.

ANU created an intergenerational family Seder guide to provide prompts for parents and grandparents to share about their Passover Seders growing up, as well as their family’s Exodus stories of escaping challenges. Additionally, there are prompts about where participants were on Oct. 7, thinking about how it will play into their larger family narrative.

The guide was created in collaboration with Emory University psychologists, Robyn Fivush and Dr. Marshall Duke, whose research, based around 9/11, showed that going back through family stories — particularly looking at both the ups and downs of personal histories — builds resilience.

“This Seder, when we all come together, and there’s so much pain and unknown in our world, we have an opportunity to find comfort and to find hope in our family stories,” Frydberg said. “In tapping into where we come from, where we are now, and, ultimately, imagining together, where we want to go, not just as families but as a people.”

Not all of the new Haggadot available this year are directly connected to Oct. 7, however. To find hope, Seder participants can also be inspired by U.S. history and its connection to the Exodus, Stu Halpern, senior adviser to the provost and senior program officer of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University, told eJP.

Prompted by his kids’ fascination with American history and the hit musical “Hamilton,” Halpern co-edited a new Haggadah titled The Promise of Liberty, with essays by rabbis, journalists and educators across the political spectrum and religious denominations. The Haggadah discusses how everyone from George Washington to Martin Luther King Jr. were motivated by the Jews escape from slavery.

“The United States has long drawn from the wellspring of the Exodus story for inspiration and to shape its own ideas and ideals,” Halpern said. The Promise of Liberty shows that “the State of Israel, the Jewish story, the Jewish people, should not be thought of as ‘you are either on our side or not on our side.’ This is something that has been a source of national American unity and reaches across the political aisle and has since our country’s inception.”

This year will also see the publication of the first translation of the Haggadah into Ukrainian, through a project funded by Project Kesher. In addition to being written in Ukrainian, the Haggadah — titled “For Our Freedom” — also features supplementary readings and a prayer for Ukrainian soldiers, according to the Religion News Service, which profiled the volume.

Still, everyone has their own way to care for themselves during this difficult time, said Levinson, pointing out the wealth of mental health inserts Recustom provides. For many, caring for themselves might also mean holding a karaoke Seder or one parodying recent movies, popular Haggadot content at Recustom. “New parodies are almost obligatory for Jews with a sense of humor,” she said. “We need those moments of lightness.”

Judah Ari Gross contributed to this report.
United flight cancellations stymie Passover travel plans

Some lawmakers criticize the decisions by U.S. airlines but don’t see a role for Congress to play in restarting flight routes to Israel

By Gabby Deutch, Emily Jacobs

I
n the moments after Iran fired a barrage of hundreds of missiles at Israel on Saturday night, Rabbi Marc Israel sat in his rented apartment in Jerusalem, panicking. His parents were about to board a plane at Ben Gurion Airport. Would it be safe for them?

Their plane back to the United States departed just after midnight, one of the last planes to leave Tel Aviv before Israeli airspace was closed to allow Israel and its allies to take down the Iranian missiles. But while Ben Gurion Airport has since reopened, the sole U.S. carrier that had been operating in Israel — United Airlines — has canceled all flights until further notice. Its decision has upended travel plans for thousands of people who had flights booked to Israel ahead of Passover next week.

Israel, a rabbi at a Conservative synagogue in Maryland who is on a month-long sabbatical volunteering in Israel, was lucky; his parents were able to leave Israel, and his in-laws, who were coming to Israel for Passover, arrived in the country just 24 hours after they were scheduled to. But they had been booked on Lufthansa, which shut down operations briefly but has since resumed service.

“People reached out to us to say, ‘Hey, do you know of any flights?’ Or, ‘How do we get there? How do we come back?’” said Doni Schwartz, co-founder of PassoverListings.com, a platform that helps people book travel for Passover, which begins on Monday night.

It’s a familiar quandary for anyone who has traveled, or attempted to travel, from the U.S. to Israel or vice versa since the Hamas terror attacks on Oct. 7. For months afterward, the only airline flying direct flights between North America and Israel was El Al, Israel’s national carrier. Flights were empty for weeks, and prices skyrocketed. Airlines cited safety concerns and limits of their insurance policies as reasons for keeping service to Israel suspended.

Several European airlines began servicing Israel in January and February, and United only resumed limited service last month — the sole American airline to do so. Delta Airlines has announced plans to resume flights from New York’s JFK Airport to Tel Aviv in June, which a spokesperson said is still the plan, though the airline reserves the right to change its mind depending on current events. The British budget airline EasyJet this week canceled all flights to Israel until October.

“It’s been a very difficult situation for people who want to get in or get out [of Israel], just based on the amount of supply, but from what we’re hearing, people are changing their plans,” said Schwartz.

Israel’s tourism industry has been in a major slump since the Hamas attacks in October. The country’s tourism minister recently traveled to a Christian conference in Tennessee to encourage American Christians to visit Israel.

Passover is one of the most popular times to visit Israel. Jewish day schools around the world are closed for the week, and many hotels in Israel offer kosher-for-Passover food — an appealing option for anyone who doesn’t want to clean and prepare their own homes, or cook large celebratory meals for a week. The holiday will likely bring the largest number of tourists to Israel since October.

A Thursday direct one-way flight from JFK to Tel Aviv on El Al cost $5,500 as of Wednesday morning. (eJewishPhilanthropy reporter Haley Cohen, whose United flight was canceled, said the airline did not help rebook her to Israel on another carrier.)

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But those who have come to Israel in recent weeks and months are reconsidering their travel options, given the unreliability of non-Israeli carriers.

Sen. James Lankford (R-OK) told JI that he spoke to Americans and Israelis in recent months who switched from United to El Al as their carrier of choice over the cancellations. “Obviously, all those different executives are going to make their own decisions on it, but the passengers will as well,” Lankford said.

“When I was in Israel, it was interesting to me to talk to some folks that are multi-year, whatever level, platinum United folks or others that are now flying El Al,” Lankford
continued. “They are saying that even when they [the airlines] were flying again, they [the customers] were furious that they stopped flying, and so they’ve chosen to be able to fly El Al.”

Still, lawmakers largely didn’t see a role for congressional action to push for restarting flight routes to Israel.

“There may well be [a way], but I doubt we’re gonna get cooperation,” Sen. John Kennedy (R-LA) said. “Passing a bill would be the longest way home, it would be easier to get the cooperation of the Biden administration and implement some sort of executive order. But I don’t think that is likely to happen.”

“The real threat would be if they [Iran] launched another large attack salvo at an airfield that was not a military airfield, let’s say it was Tel Aviv at the airport. You can hit an airplane on the ground,” Sen. Mark Kelly (D-AZ), a former Navy pilot, said of the risks U.S. airlines have to consider when sending their planes into Israel.

In 2014, during Israel’s Operation Protective Edge in Gaza, the Federal Aviation Administration banned U.S. flights into and out of Israel for 36 hours after a rocket fired by Hamas in the Gaza Strip landed one mile from Ben Gurion Airport. The move was strongly criticized by the Israeli government before it was reversed. Now, though, the FAA has not put a ban in place — it’s the airlines that have decided on their own not to fly into Israel. (An FAA spokesperson declined to comment.)

Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO) said that while he wasn’t sure if the FAA could address insurance or security risks involved in conducting those flights, “You’d hate to see the ability to travel back and forth stymied or reduced in any way.”

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“I think private companies and also the U.S. government have to be considering the safety of our population. And you have Americans that are flying to Tel Aviv. I think it’s a concern and it sounds like these two airlines think it’s a concern as well,” Kelly said of United and Delta. “I think it’s valid, but I also think that Israel along with our help and our allies’ help demonstrated how inept the Iranians are, so I wouldn’t jump to any conclusions.”

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) told JI that he would “do anything within reason to give them [U.S. airlines] the incentives to fly to Israel,” calling Iran’s strike on Israel over the weekend “another sign of” Tehran’s efforts to “isolate” the Jewish state.

Aside from European airlines, some Gulf carriers — most notably Emirates — continue to fly to Tel Aviv.

April 16, 2024

Relief group SmartAid providing thousands of tents to Gazans, says it’s the only Israeli NGO operating in the Strip

‘Yes we are Israeli and yes we are helping our [own] people and yes we are helping our [people whom many Israelis perceive as our enemies]... That is what Jews do. There is never a simple answer or solution,’ group’s founding director Shachar Zahavi tells eJP

By Judith Sudilovsky

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

The Israeli humanitarian tech aid nonprofit SmartAid has provided thousands of tents to civilians in Gaza in partnership with an American relief group since January, which its founder revealed exclusively to eJewishPhilanthropy.

“We have helped build three refugee camps; it is thousands of tents,” Shachar Zahavi, founding director of SmartAid, told eJP. “We have experience in war-torn areas for decades — this is a whole different ball game.”

Working with partners whose logistics infrastructures are spread across the Gaza Strip, Egypt and Jordan, SmartAid has purchased tents through Egypt and brought them to the crossing on the Egyptian border, where the IDF has inspected, vetted and approved every shipment. The tents have then been delivered to their partners on the ground for distribution to civilians, Zahavi said. He refrained from identifying his partners in order to protect them and the civilians receiving the aid from Hamas retribution.

Since the IDF’s accidental killing of seven World Central Kitchen aid workers earlier this month, Zahavi said he felt it necessary to come out openly about the work SmartAid has been doing to let the world know that Israelis and Jews are also involved in helping with the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

“We have been doing this quietly for
months,” he said. “I want [people critical of Israel] to know that we are an international humanitarian aid organization, and yes we are Israeli and yes we are helping our [own] people and yes we are helping [people whom many Israelis perceive as our enemies]. This is exactly what Israel did when civil war broke out in Syria and the (injured) civilians came to Israel’s borders. That is what Jews do. There is never a simple answer or solution.”

Zahavi said he believes that his organization is the only Israeli nonprofit currently operating in Gaza. eJP could not immediately verify the claim.

The strike on the World Central Kitchen staff has also prompted a number of Jewish groups to step up their humanitarian efforts on behalf of Gazans, notably the New Israel Fund, which recently launched a Passover-themed fundraising campaign to combat food insecurity in Gaza.

He said the organization is constantly reevaluating how it conducts its work in Gaza to assure the aid does not get into the hands of Hamas, and has coordinated its aid delivery with the Israel Defense Forces and Defense Ministry’s Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), which provided them with the names of trusted American charities with whom to cooperate.

“We make sure we do not get involved in anything that might by mistake get into Hamas’ hands. We spoke to the IDF. We did all due diligence to make sure that we are looking at what the types of needs there are, and if Hamas might take it away from civilians,” Zahavi said. “There is always an internal debate about what we can do to add another percentage of certainty that [our aid] reaches civilians, specifically kids.”

The efforts are being funded by a donation of an initial $200,000 from donors from abroad specifically for this project, he said. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, the donors asked to remain anonymous.

Since the strike, Zahavi said that SmartAid has also been in discussions with its partners about the growing food needs in Gaza, if it can help with distribution, with partners in the US in the waiting with “hundreds of tons” of food prepared to be shipped to SmartAID for distribution if given the approval.

Zahavi said that the decision to operate in Gaza came about over a series of conversations between SmartAid, longtime colleagues from international aid groups and different SmartAid Jewish and non-Jewish donors about whether to consider helping Gaza children.

“Some of our donors discussed with us that we are also a humanitarian charity and we have helped all over the world, and that we need to consider this,” said Zahavi. “It is something that is obvious but because it is in our country and because it is our people it is a lot harder to digest. It took a while but eventually we (came to the conclusion) that we are an aid organization and we are helping around the world in 40 countries. This is another conflict which hit straight in our backyard and so what are we going to do about it?”

Zahavi acknowledged the moral complexity of an Israeli organization — one that has helped the Israeli victims of the Oct. 7 attacks and the war — providing aid to Palestinians in Gaza.

“As Jews, we totally demand the release of the hostages, totally demand that Hamas be held fully accountable for what it did. I had close friends who were massacred on Oct. 7 and I know people who are still [captive] in Gaza. I am not doing this lightly,” he said. “But there is also the Jewish side of us, the Holocaust side of us, the humane side of us. How are we going to live with everything going on [in Gaza]?” he said.

“Everyone is saying we are against Hamas, not against children, but for me saying it wasn’t enough. I felt we had to do something. I know there are a lot of groups and individuals around the world in the Jewish community who are against this and I totally understand,” he said, noting that SmartAid also continues to provide aid to survivors of the Oct. 7 attacks, evacuated Israeli communities and Israeli farmers along the Gaza border.

Coming from a family with very few members who survived the Holocaust, Zahavi said he takes his humanitarian aid work seriously, combining the need to do what is right with the desire to show the world that as an Israeli he actually does what Israel says.

“I am doing what people are saying,” said Zahavi. “If you just Google (you can find) thousands of articles about the Israeli government saying they are supporting aid for civilians, but are against Hamas. We are taking the words and making it into action.”

♦
A time of increasing disagreement in the Democratic Party over Israel policy and growing calls within the party for conditioning aid to Israel, Virginia state Del. Dan Helmer, who is running for a House seat in Northern Virginia, is pushing back, standing on strong pro-Israel positions and a traditional view of the U.S.-Israel relationship. "American leadership is best served by having strong relationships with other democracies, and by leading with our values, and that includes having a strong relationship with the Jewish democracy in Israel," Helmer said in a recent interview with Jewish Insider. 

His stalwart support for Israel offers fresh evidence that in politically competitive suburban turf, it's still good politics to stand with Israel in a Democratic primary. One of his leading Democratic rivals, former state House Speaker Eileen Filler-Corn, a Democratic Majority for Israel endorsee, has also made support for Israel central to her campaign.

While Filler-Corn has touted her backing from DMFI, Helmer highlighted the support he's received from many Jewish and pro-Israel donors, as well as endorsements from Jewish elected officials including former Rep. Max Rose (D-NY). 

Despite their shared support for Israel, Helmer and Filler-Corn have clashed in the past. He was part of the effort that ousted her as Democratic Party leader after Democrats lost control of Virginia's General Assembly in the 2021 elections.

If Helmer, who is also Jewish, and Filler-Corn end up splitting pro-Israel Democratic voters, it could boost the prospects of an alternative candidate who is less supportive of Israel.

State Sen. Jennifer Boysko, who supported a cease-fire less than a month after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack against Israel, state Sen. Suhas Subramanyam and former Virginia Education Secretary Atif Qarni are also running in the Democratic primary, which features 10 candidates. Krystle Kaul, a former defense official, has put up a competitive fundraising showing largely through self-financing.

The son of an Israeli who immigrated to the U.S. and the grandson of Holocaust survivors, Helmer had relatives who fought in the Palmach, part of Israel's pre-state military, and still has relatives living in Israel. Helmer is also an Iraq and Afghanistan veteran and a West Point graduate.

Helmer expressed support for an Israeli campaign in Rafah to eliminate the remaining Hamas battalions, noting that a potential incursion has the backing of broad swaths of Israeli society, and that eliminating Hamas and freeing the hostages is a necessary step to achieving peace.

"I hope they understand that this is an organization that not only hates, and seeks to exterminate Jews, but also will kill you for being a homosexual, will kill you for having sex outside of wedlock, will kill you for being a member of a different faction or religious minority," Helmer said. "And so this is the hatred and the enemies that Israel is facing, and that unleashed a war by killing civilians and taking hostages in violation of the laws."

Responding to Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer's (D-NY) call for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's ouster, Helmer said that U.S. officials shouldn't be calling for leadership changes in allied nations — although he did say it's appropriate for the U.S. to give guidance and have discussions with allies over issues like judicial reform.

He called on Israel to be "thoughtful in its targeting," to address mistakes and to "do everything it can" to increase humanitarian aid. And he said the U.S. should be "encouraging" Israel to begin to plan for the day after the war in Gaza and a path to sustainable security for both sides.

"The context of the way in which Israel
manages the war in the next few months will have a real bearing on its long-term security," he said, "and as allies, we should be working with Israel to eliminate the threat of Hamas, and help them enable a sustained peace that protects legitimate interests of the United States and Israel."

While acknowledging the widespread skepticism inside Israel, he said that the U.S. needs to continue to push for a two-state solution, describing that as ultimately the only sustainable pathway to preserving and securing Israel.

"It is in U.S. interests to stand with Israel against Iran to ensure Iranian efforts to disrupt U.S. priorities through terrorist acts and development of a nuclear weapon fail, and I'm encouraged by the bipartisan support for that policy that we're seeing today," Helmer said.

Addressing the broader Iran challenge in the region, Helmer said that the U.S. should "lead with diplomacy... while maintaining robust military capability," pointing to efforts to build alliances and partnerships as the key to combating terrorist threats as well as adversaries such as China.

"There's a real opportunity for peace here" between Israel and its Arab neighbors "that [Oct. 7] was meant to derail, and I don't like letting terrorists derail opportunities for peace," he said.

Helmer said on X that Israel was right to strike Islamic Revolutionary Guard officials at the Iranian consulate in Syria, an attack that killed senior Iranian commanders, and praised the Israeli and U.S. efforts to fend off the Iranian counter-strike on Israel.

"It is in U.S. interests to stand with Israel against Iran to ensure Iranian efforts to disrupt U.S. priorities through terrorist acts and development of a nuclear weapon fail, and I'm encouraged by the bipartisan support for that policy that we're seeing today," he said.

Helmer told JI he hopes to sit on the Armed Services or Foreign Affairs Committee if he's elected.

At home, Helmer said that he believes his campaign is picking up support from within the Jewish community because people see him as a "champion who stands up against antisemitism."

He noted that his then-GOP opponent targeted him in 2021 with a mailer widely seen as antisemitic, and added that his children have also faced antisemitic incidents, including swastika graffiti, in their schools.

"We have an opportunity to confront this head-on by having champions who stand for American values and show that you can be a Jew and an American," he said, "and that those things are inherently tied to one another, that this is our Promised Land, this is a place that can keep us safe, and we need to keep fighting for that." Helmer pledged to stand up to antisemitism inside his party on Capitol Hill as well, if he's elected.

Helmer said that one of his proudest accomplishments in the state's General Assembly was introducing bipartisan legislation, signed into law by Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin this month, that adds ethnic origin as a protected class under the state's hate crimes and discrimination laws. The initiative was aimed in part at combating antisemitism.

Helmer said that legislation passed in Virginia to combat antisemitism could provide a "good template" for legislation that could be implemented on the national level as well.

In 2023, however, the state delegate voted against legislation adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism.

He explained that he did so because the bill's sponsors refused to acknowledge the antisemitic attacks that had targeted him on the campaign trail, claiming they were using the bill "as cover for what they did."

But he said he's supportive of the IHRA definition, and would have voted for a House resolution last year declaring that anti-Zionism is antisemitic and expressing support for the IHRA definition, which split the House Democratic caucus in half.

Helmer linked his political career and his run for Congress to the ascendancy of former President Donald Trump, explaining, "We need to make sure the democracy that welcomed my family — and offers safety and prosperity — is there for our kids and grandkids."
Inspired by Berkeley prof, Academic Engagement Network launches national Faculty Against Antisemitism Movement

Organisation calls for followers to ‘keep the light on,’ as Professor Ron Hassner did when he staged a sleep-in in his office to get the university’s administrators to take antisemitism seriously

By Haley Cohen

When Professor Ron Hassner made the decision to stage a sit-in protest at his University of California, Berkeley office until the school’s administration agreed to take seriously rising campus antisemitism, several other local professors were inspired to visit the professor of political science in solidarity as he ate and slept in his office — and taught class from there — for two weeks.

Encouraged by Hassner’s activism and the support he received from other concerned faculty, the Academic Engagement Network on Tuesday announced it will coordinate a national campaign called the Faculty Against Antisemitism Movement (FAAM) and #KeepTheLightOn, eJewishPhilanthropy has learned exclusively.

“The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

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“In many places, many faculty share a concern about antisemitism but don’t necessarily know one another, so I think networking is crucial,” said Hassner, who ended his protest on March 23, after two weeks, saying the school had made sufficient commitments to satisfy his concerns about the safety of Jewish students on campus. (The “hashtag” for the campaign comes from the fact that Hassner kept his office light on for the entire two weeks of the sit-in.)

The initiatives will provide support to participating faculty, including a website that will be continually updated with information and resources for faculty looking to counter antisemitic and anti-Israel claims and actions, as well as a FAAM social media toolkit, trips that bring American faculty to Israel and support for faculty-focused initiatives, such as developing a database of academics around the U.S. who will serve as reviewers for Israelis who are being ostracized by academic groups, according to AEN.

“Faculty that holds antisemitic or anti-Zionist views are an extreme minority but are often able to monopolize the public sphere because so many faculty are silent, so this won’t take a tremendous amount of effort to signal to campuses that [the] majority of faculty will not stand by when antisemitism or anti-Zionism are aired,” Hassner told eJP.

Faculty for Justice in Palestine chapters have taken root on more than 80 campuses since the start of the Israel-Hamas war. The Faculty Against Antisemitism Movement is designed “to show students that there’s another voice to counter [groups such as] Faculty for Justice in Palestine,” AEN Executive Director Miriam Elman told eJP.

Hassner started his protest by himself, “because I had become impatient with my administration and very soon found that many dozen faculty on my campus, and hundreds across California supported me, wanted to join and formed initiatives on their own campus,” he recalled. “So I think the shared concern is there, and I think the administrations share that concern, too.”

The initiative will harness the 1,000 faculty members on 322 campuses in AEN, according to the group. Michael Saenger, a professor of English at Southwestern University, a liberal arts college in Georgetown, Texas, and a member of FAAM’s steering committee, is one of the educators participating.

“Many Jewish faculty, and many other faculty as well, have been appalled as the energies associated with social justice have veered into ideological conformity, advocacy of violence, and openly antisemitic threats,” Saenger said in a statement. “We have written books, op-eds, and articles, but they are not penetrating the echo chamber of anti-Zionist antisemitism. As with previous protest movements, visual displays are sometimes necessary to get people to stop demonizing marginalized groups. We need to respond to bullying and hate, directed against ourselves and Jewish students, more directly and more personally: by visibly advocating for a university that treats Jews as people, and that treats Israel as a nation.”

Elman said the group plans to provide faculty with several visual materials. “In this first campaign launch, we’re sharing branded items — pens, stickers for the office door, mugs that you can take to the department meeting that says ‘faculty against antisemitism.’”

“Those visual materials help start conversations on campus with other colleagues and administrators,” she said. “Initially we want to share the idea as broadly as possible, through our members and other faculty who sign up.”

The initiative is slated to start in May, as students wrap up the semester, kicking off with the #KeepTheLightOn campaign, encouraging participating faculty to leave a light on in their offices to show support and solidarity for their Jewish students facing antisemitism on campus — just as Hassner did during his protest.

Attempts to manipulate public opinion in the U.S. through several avenues, including media.
How Israel blocked most of Iran’s rockets from reaching its borders

Much of the credit has gone to the strength of the United States Central Command, which has been coordinating military operations between regional allies, including Israel, for the past three years

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Israel’s Defense Forces remained on high alert Monday, one day after Iran’s unprecedented drone and missile attack put the country on lockdown and sent fighter jets – and advanced missile defense systems – roaring into action.

While some of the civilian restrictions put in place by the army’s Home Front Command on Saturday were eased early on Monday morning, including the resumption of children’s activities during the Passover vacation, the Israeli army reported additional UAV infiltration attempts from the east and the south overnight as the country’s leaders met to debate how to respond to Tehran.

In Israel, the defensive operation against the first attack by another regional country since Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein’s attempts during the first Gulf War in 1991 was seen as a huge success, not only for the effectiveness of Israeli-designed military defense systems but also because of seamless cooperation and support that came from Israel’s close allies – the U.S., Britain and France, as well as from neighboring countries, most notably Jordan.

“This was the first time that such a coalition worked together against the threat of Iran and its proxies in the Middle East,” IDF spokesperson Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari said during a briefing on Sunday.

The combined effort, which is believed to have included fighter jets and defensive systems deployed by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, came under the umbrella of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), whose mandate is to coordinate military operations and activities between its allies in the Middle East. CENTCOM also aims to bolster regional security and support U.S. interests, including pushing back against Iranian aggression.

“Last night, a defensive coalition of Israel and its international partners successfully thwarted a large-scale attack from Iran,” IDF spokesman Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari said during a briefing on Sunday. “The threat from Iran was met with the aerial, operational, technological, and intelligence superiority of a united defensive coalition of international allies led by the United States, together with Great Britain, France, and other partners.”

He added, “This was the first time that such a coalition worked together against the threat of Iran and its proxies in the Middle East” and that combined effort, which also included the deployment of the Iron Dome, the David’s Sling and the Arrow 2 and 3 defense systems, “intercepted 99% of the threats to Israel.”

A statement from G7 leaders, who convened yesterday, accused Iran of having “further stepped toward the destabilization of the region and risks provoking an uncontrollable regional escalation. This must be avoided. We will continue to work to stabilize the situation and avoid further escalation. In this spirit, we demand that Iran and its proxies cease their attacks, and we stand ready to take further measures now and in response to further destabilizing initiatives.”

Israel moved from the U.S.’ European military command, EUCOM, to CENTCOM in September 2021, one year after signing the Abraham Accords normalization agreements with the UAE and Bahrain. CENTCOM Commander Gen. Erik Kurilla traveled to Israel last Thursday, and extended his trip through Saturday afternoon, departing hours before the missiles were fired.

While there has been no public announcement stating exactly which nations participated in Sunday’s defensive operation against Iran, U.S. officials sent readouts of conversations with leaders in Jordan and Saudi Arabia condemning Iran’s attack, reiterating support for Israel and thanking them for being part of the alliance.

“Israel's transfer to CENTCOM in 2021 basically paved the way for greater cooperation in what can be called interoperability between the Israeli military and other militaries in the region under the umbrella of the United States,” Yaakov Katz, senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute and the author of three books on Israeli military affairs, told Jewish Insider on Monday.

A statement from Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder, noted that Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin had spoken with Saudi Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman. Austin “underscored the importance of the enduring U.S. defense partnership with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and reiterated the United States’ commitment to working with the Kingdom and other partners to de-escalate tensions in the region,” the statement said.

Hours after Sunday’s attack, the IDF’s chief of general staff, Herzi Halevi, spoke with Kurilla, to whom he expressed “great appreciation for the joint defensive effort in thwarting and intercepting the Iranian attack toward Israel.”
Halevi also told Kurilla “that the close cooperation between the two militaries throughout the war has led to the formation of a strong defensive coalition that proved itself last night.”

“Israel's transfer to CENTCOM in 2021 basically paved the way for greater cooperation in what can be called interoperability between the Israeli military and other militaries in the region under the umbrella of the United States,” Yaakov Katz, senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute and the author of three books on Israeli military affairs, told Jewish Insider on Monday.

“We saw that play out early Sunday morning, with the regional cooperation between Israel, Jordan, American British and others in the region, who helped intercept and stop the Iranian assault of drones and missiles against Israel, all coordinated by the United States and by the commander of CENTCOM who had even visited Israel a couple of days before,” he said.

Katz said that going forward, “this lays the foundation and enables a growing and further cooperation that can be leveraged also towards potential diplomatic normalization and not just in the military realm as was seen Sunday morning.”

Late Sunday night, Israel's intimate three-man war cabinet — consisting of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and former head of Israel’s military, Benny Gantz — met to weigh the country’s next steps.

According to reports, the meeting ended without a clear decision. As of Monday morning, the IDF had yet to respond to the attack, in which an estimated 30 cruise missiles, 120 ballistic missiles, and 170 suicide drones were launched, as it faced pressure from allies including the U.S. and U.K. not to take steps that would further ignite an already tense region.

“Israel cannot retaliate without consulting with the Americans,” said Sima Shine, head of the Iran program at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, emphasizing that it was “vital” for Israel to work together with the U.S. and other partners and “not to retaliate tomorrow.”

There was also some indication that Israel might utilize the success of Sunday’s military coalition and focus instead on working to create a united front against Iran’s determined nuclear ambitions, a stance Netanyahu has long pushed.

A statement from Gallant’s office on Sunday night said that the minister had spoken with Austin, thanking him for the “unparalleled cooperation and coordination demonstrated by the defense establishments and militaries of both countries, together with international partners.”

According to the release, the Israeli minister also highlighted “the opportunity to establish an international coalition and strategic alliance to counter the threat posed by Iran.”

Sima Shine, head of the Iran program at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, said that while Israel had the military and intelligence capabilities to respond to Iran, she did not believe a retaliation would be immediate or would happen without coordinating with the U.S.

“Israel cannot retaliate without consulting with the Americans,” she said, emphasizing that it was “vital” for Israel to work together with the U.S. and other partners and “not to retaliate tomorrow.”

Shine, former head of the research and evaluation division of the Mossad, said that “Israel has the military capabilities to attack in Iran but if it does retaliate it will be on military sites and not on civilian sites or economic sites.”

“It will be within the same parameters of this attack — on different military systems in Iran,” she said, adding, “and we do have a lot of intelligence and knowledge of what is happening in Iran.”