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As talks resume, Rubio, Vance accuse Iran of trying to restart its nuclear program

Iran's president: Khamenei has banned weapons of mass destruction, so country not seeking nukes; Trump aides said to prefer Israel attack Iran first: 'The politics are a lot better'

By [Tol Staff](#) and [Agencies](#) Today, 11:44 am

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Vehicles drive past an anti-Israel and anti-US billboard hanging from a building that reads 'The target is clear: Trump's 51st state' on Palestine Square in Tehran on February 25, 2026. (ATTA KENARE / AFP)

Negotiators resumed US-Iran nuclear talks in Geneva on Thursday, hours after senior American officials made the case that Iran poses a major threat to the United States and is actively working toward a nuclear bomb.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Vice President JD Vance both told reporters on Wednesday that Tehran is working to rebuild sites that were damaged by American and Israeli

airstrikes during last year's 12-day war, a claim some analysts have cast doubt on.

Speaking to reporters Wednesday during a trip to St. Kitts and Nevis, Rubio accused Iran of continuing to pursue a nuclear weapon and said its ballistic missiles were also a major threat to US assets.

"After their nuclear program was obliterated, they were told not to try to restart it, and here they are," Rubio said. "You can see them always trying to rebuild elements of it. They're not enriching [uranium] right now, but they're trying to get to the point where they ultimately can."

Rubio said Iran also possessed a very large number of ballistic missiles that threaten US interests in the region and that it was trying to develop weapons that can reach the continental United States.

"Beyond just the nuclear program, they possess these conventional weapons that are solely designed to attack America and attack Americans if they so choose to do so... They already possess weapons that can reach much of Europe already now, as we speak," Rubio said.



US Secretary of State Marco Rubio speaks to reporters in a departure lounge before returning to Washington following meetings with Caribbean Community (CARICOM) leaders, at Robert L. Bradshaw International Airport in Basseterre, Saint Kitts and Nevis on February 25, 2026. (Jonathan Ernst/Pool/AFP)

Tehran's insistence on not discussing the topic of ballistic missiles in the Geneva talks is a "big, big problem," Rubio said, adding that he did not want to characterize the Thursday talks as anything other than "the next opportunity to talk," even as he hoped for progress.

"Hopefully they're productive but eventually we'll have to have conversations more than just the nuclear program," he said.

However, Rubio steered clear of saying whether the talks in Geneva would be a make-or-break moment in deciding if the United States attacks Iran.

"The president wants diplomatic solutions. He prefers them greatly," he said.

Asked about a potential strike on Iran, Rubio said: "The president's made no decision on that, so I don't know if Thursday's the key date for that. I think progress needs to be made."

Iran has the largest stockpile of ballistic missiles in the Middle East, according to the US Office of the

Director of National Intelligence. Iranian missiles have a self-imposed range of 2,000 kilometers (1,240 miles), which officials in the past said was enough to protect the country since it covers the distance to Israel.



US Vice President JD Vance speaks at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building on the White House complex in Washington, DC, on February 25, 2026. (Oliver Contreras / AFP)

Also Wednesday, Vance said White House envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner would be heading the American delegation to the talks to assess whether an agreement could still be reached.

“The principle is very simple: Iran cannot have a nuclear weapon,” Vance told reporters. “If they try to rebuild a nuclear weapon, that causes problems for us. In fact, we’ve seen evidence that they have tried to do exactly that.”

Vance added that US President Donald Trump wants to address the Iranian nuclear program “diplomatically, but of course the president has other options as well.”

Despite the claims from Rubio and Vance — which echoed remarks made by Trump in his State of the Union address Tuesday night — the Wall Street Journal on Wednesday [cited experts and diplomats](#) saying that Iran has not made any major advances on its atomic program since last June’s US strikes.

David Albright, a former UN weapons inspector, told the newspaper that according to satellite imagery, “we don’t see any evidence that they are trying to reconstitute their nuclear-weapons program. They are essentially on hold.”

And on Thursday, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian reiterated that his country is not seeking a nuclear weapon.

Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has banned weapons of mass destruction, which “clearly means Tehran won’t develop nuclear weapons,” Pezeshkian said.

This satellite image from Planet Labs PBC shows the Pilot Fuel Enrichment Plant covered by a new roof at Iran’s Natanz nuclear enrichment site on January 28, 2026. (Planet Labs PBC via AP)

US Senator Lindsey Graham, considered close to Trump, wrote on X on Wednesday that if reports are true, “that there is a consideration of allowing Iran to have very small enrichment of uranium for face-saving purposes: screw that.”

Graham said the Iranian regime “has American blood on its hands and they have killed over 30,000 of their citizens simply because they demand the end to their oppression. I could care less about efforts to save face

for this regime. I would like to see the people of Iran change the regime – it’s long overdue. I hope help is on the way.”

‘High likelihood of US casualties... That comes with lots of political risk’

Meanwhile, according to a [report](#) by the Politico news site, unnamed advisers to Trump have argued that an Israeli strike would lead Iran to retaliate, helping build support among the US public for an American military offensive.

“There’s thinking in and around the administration that the politics are a lot better if the Israelis go first and alone and the Iranians retaliate against us, and give us more reason to take action,” said one of the sources quoted in the report.

Two sources were cited by Politico as saying that a joint US-Israeli operation could be a possible course of action, whether or not Israel strikes first, with one saying that though the talks with Iranians are serious, those closest to Trump believe “we’re going to bomb them.”

The report said that the extent of a potential American military campaign remains unclear, citing concerns that the depletion of US munitions could encourage China to attempt an invasion of Taiwan, and that a more expansive offensive raises the prospect of casualties.

“If we’re talking about a regime-change scale attack, Iran is very likely to retaliate with everything they’ve

got. We have a lot of assets in the region and every one of those is a potential target,” said one of the sources. “And they’re not under the Iron Dome. So there’s a high likelihood of American casualties. And that comes with lots of political risk.”



US aircraft carrier USS Gerald Ford (L) is pictured docked at Souda Bay in the Greek Mediterranean island of Crete, on February 24, 2026. (Costas METAXAKIS / AFP)

As both countries jockey for position ahead of the talks, the [Financial Times reported](#) Thursday that Iran is seeking to offer financial incentives to Trump in a bid to reach an agreement.

According to one source quoted in the report, the Islamic Republic will appeal to Trump’s affinity for deal-making and float a “bonanza” to the US, including investments in its large oil and gas industries.

Such an offer would be “specifically directed at Trump, a major economic bonanza in oil and gas and

mining rights, critical minerals and all of that,” the source told FT.

A US official told the publication that Iran is gleaning lessons from the situation in Venezuela, where the US has sought access to the country’s vast oil reserves after seizing its president in a nighttime raid last month.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-talks-resume-rubio-vance-accuse-iran-of-trying-to-restart-its-nuclear-program/>

‘Mouse Ali’: Khamenei’s hidden network sustains his authoritarian rule from hiding
Bayt-e Rahbari has allowed Khamenei’s authority to remain intact in his absence and, according to United Against Nuclear Iran, highlights the regime’s durability By [DANIELLE GREYMAN-KENNARD](#) FEBRUARY 26, 2026
13:38 Updated: FEBRUARY 26, 2026 18:34



Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei looks on during a meeting at the IRGC Aerospace Force achievements exhibition in Tehran, Iran November 19, 2023. (photo credit: Office of the Iranian Supreme Leader/WANA (West Asia News Agency) via REUTERS)

While Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s absence has been largely mocked by his opposition and interpreted by Western media as a sign of fear, it has demonstrated how deeply embedded his network of control in Iran truly is, a new report by United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI) noted on Thursday.

Reports have suggested that the 86-year-old Islamist has been hiding out in a secure bunker, leading Iranian critics to label him “Moushe-Ali” (Mouse Ali). Nevertheless, years of embedding his loyal clerics throughout civil society have enabled him to maintain control, the organization noted.

After the 12 Day War in June, which saw many Iranian officials and nuclear masterminds killed in targeted strikes, concerns about an attempt on Khamenei began to shape his public profile.



His initial absence of nearly 30 days has seemingly led the Islamic regime’s leader to begin taking a step back from public appearances, especially since the US’s operation to arrest Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro last month.

Although acknowledging some level of restructuring within the regime, especially with the appointment of Ali Larijani as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and the creation of a new Defense Council, UANI claimed that there is insufficient evidence to suggest a fundamental change in Tehran’s power structure.

People walk near a mural featuring images of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the leader of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, on a street in Tehran, Iran, February 26, 2026. (credit: MAJID ASGARIPOUR/WANA (WEST ASIA NEWS AGENCY) VIA REUTERS)

Arguing that the reality is more nuanced, the non-profit stressed that the extent of Khamenei's loyal network was becoming increasingly apparent. It said that they aimed to ensure his influence and authority remained intact even in his absence from the public and political arena.

For decades, the Bayt-e Rahbari (The Office of the Supreme Leader) has manufactured a hidden political and economic empire, extending across the military and security establishments, to reach into Iran's cultural and economic sectors. This highlights the regime's durability, UANI said.

Only two months after Khamenei took power in 1989, he established the Bayt, appointing several loyal clerics with security and military backgrounds to positions of power. By 1994, he is said to have used his influence to pressure and manipulate the Qom seminary into giving them the title of marja (the highest level of Twelver Shia religious cleric) through the office.

Subsequently, Khamenei is said to have grown his Bayt to include over 4,000 employees in its core office and over 40,000 in affiliated roles, expanding his influence over three decades.

To control presidencies, the supreme leader began embedding an office in the Bayt parallel to every government ministry, which allowed expansive supervision and ensured every decision was aligned with Khamenei's personal doctrine. Even the military is heavily controlled by the Islamic dictator, with military officials needing the Bayt's approval before receiving a promotion beyond the rank of second brigadier.

By establishing a network of loyal followers in the most senior levels of the Iranian military, the report claims he was able to "transform the IRGC into a praetorian and personalistic army."

The Bayt's Military Office is headed by Brig.-Gen. Mohammad Shirazi, who has personal and familial ties to Khamenei.

The Bayt's Counterintelligence Office is headed by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) member Hojatolislam Gholam-Hosseini Ramazani, one of Khamenei's most trusted followers.

His representative across Iran's armed forces, Ayatollah Ali Saeedi, is deeply embedded within Khamenei's personal circles.

Through strategic layers of bureaucratization, cooptation, and coercion, Khamenei's office also controls Iran's seminary schools, the report noted.

With his Clerical Basij, a militia embedded within seminaries, the regime is able to monitor dissent, promote loyalty, and quickly silence critics. The surveillance, patronage, and paramilitary structures within the schools guarantee that only voices legitimizing Khamenei's reign are allowed to become influential religious scholars.

Successor plans limit Iran change even if Khamenei dies

While Khamenei may be killed in a potential conflict with the US and Israel, the careful planning of his successor and the reach of the Bayt across every sector means that a genuine change in Iran will be "highly improbable," the report concluded.

The Islamic Republic's most enduring strength lies in this hidden architecture of control, which will continue to shape the country's future long after Khamenei himself departs from the scene."

The report noted that helping to oversee the vast network are Khamenei's four sons: Mostafa, Mojtaba, Masoud, and Meysam.

Mojtaba, the second-born son, is widely regarded as politically influential and is thought to be the most likely successor, while his elder brother has kept a low public profile.

To bring down the current regime, policymakers must target the Bayt with a combination of sanctions, cyber operations, and military measures, the UANI report insisted, not just the supreme leader and his potential successor. <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-888099>

As US-Iran talks resume, Israel braces for possible American strike and Iranian retaliation

As the talks in Geneva face possible collapse, Israeli officials assess that any American strike would trigger Iranian retaliation against Israel, with Hezbollah and the Houthis likely to join; the IDF strikes Radwan Force sites in Lebanon

[Itamar Eichner, Lior Ben Ari](#) | 11:01

Regardless of the outcome of the talks between the United States and Iran in Geneva, Israel is preparing for the possibility that negotiations will collapse and that the United States will strike Iran.

The preparations come amid U.S. demands that a senior Iranian official told Al-Jazeera were “completely rejected in part” by Tehran. Despite that response, the talks resumed this evening.

Israeli officials assess that the Houthis and Hezbollah will not remain on the sidelines in the event of a confrontation. The IDF struck eight Hezbollah Radwan Force camps in Lebanon on Thursday.

The strikes in the Baalbek area

Israel’s working assumption is that any U.S. strike would prompt an Iranian attack on Israel, something Iranian officials have already publicly signaled. According to Israeli assessments, from Tehran’s perspective a U.S. strike would not be seen as serving American interests alone but also Israel’s. Therefore, if the United States attacks, Israel is likely to face Iranian strikes.

Israeli officials believe launching missiles at Israel would be easier for Iran than attacking U.S. targets. Beyond that, an attack on Israel is seen by Tehran as ideological. Iranian leaders view Israel as the source of evil and believe it must be targeted. In any case, Israel says it is fully prepared for a scenario in which a U.S. strike on Iran would be met by Iranian retaliation against Israel.

A possible sign of looming escalation also emerged from Iran, where it was reported that some universities will move to remote learning through the end of the academic year. The official explanation was that the start of the semester coincides with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Against the backdrop of a potential military confrontation, questions have arisen in Israel over how much Iran has recovered since last summer’s Operation Rising Lion, a 12-day war. Israeli officials say Iran’s motivation to rebuild is high and that rehabilitation efforts are underway through various methods. President Donald Trump recently said Iran has begun restoring its nuclear program, apparently referring to reports that the Islamic Republic is constructing a new facility.

Israel is also closely monitoring Iran’s efforts to restore its missile-launch capabilities. Officials say they did not expect otherwise, believing that while last summer’s achievements were significant, they would not hold for long given Iran’s ideological zeal.

As for Iran’s air defense systems, Israeli officials say progress has been made in restoring both offensive and defensive arrays. Iran is cooperating with China, though Israeli officials say media reports on the extent of that cooperation are exaggerated. Air defense systems are being rebuilt and weapons shipments to Iran are continuing, developments Israel is tracking with concern. Still, officials stress that the rehabilitation is incomplete and that Iranian messaging does not match the reality on the ground.

Israel assesses that the Geneva talks are unlikely to produce an agreement. U.S. conditions are described as highly specific and at the upper threshold of demands. Because they are not vague, Israeli officials believe Iran’s ability to meet them, both organizationally and ideologically, is low and nearly impossible.

“Their ability to comply with an agreement that weakens them and prevents enrichment is inconceivable,” one official familiar with the details said. “They wake up in the morning thinking about how to enrich uranium. It is so deeply ingrained that it is very hard to believe they can meet the very high bar being set. But surprises are possible. Just last week everything was ready for a strike, and at the last moment the Americans agreed to negotiations. We may be surprised again.”

How will the proxies respond?

Israel is preparing for the possibility that Iran’s regional proxies will join a war. Although Hezbollah refrained from intervening during last summer’s 12-day conflict, Israeli officials say the Shiite militant group has since been rebuilding and is unlikely to stay out again.



The strikes in Lebanon

This time, Israeli officials say, Hezbollah has every reason to enter the fight as part of its stated vision, particularly after staying out of both the Oct. 7 massacre and the 12-day war. Officials in Jerusalem believe the likelihood that Hezbollah would join a future conflict is very high.

On Thursday, the Israeli military said it struck eight Radwan Force military camps near Baalbek in eastern Lebanon. The military said the sites stored large quantities

of weapons, including firearms and rockets, and were used for training and planning attacks against Israeli forces

and civilians. Fighters conducted, among other things, live-fire drills there, the military said.

Officials familiar with Hezbollah's current condition described it as still "collecting the pieces," not the idealized force Israel once feared. "But it is a terrorist organization whose vision remains intact," one official said. "It measures itself, among other things, by when it assists the axis. It has an opportunity to help and will not give it up easily. We could all be surprised and Hezbollah may choose to wait and build strength rather than expend weapons and capabilities. But even the concerning possibility, even if uncertain, that Hezbollah decides to join would turn this into a multi-front axis war. That deeply concerns Israel, and it is preparing accordingly."



The Houthis are training and are not expected to disappear from the arena

Another arena of concern is the Houthi movement in Yemen. During last summer's war, the Houthis fired three to four rockets. While not a high number, Israeli officials say the launches demonstrated a willingness to fight. Although the Houthis are no longer at full operational capacity, their perception of reality differs, and Israel believes they will remain a long-term challenge.

As for all the proxies, Israeli officials say they must assume they will join the conflict. The outcome remains unclear, but preparations are underway, from calculating strike plans and munitions to identifying targets.

Netanyahu draws red lines

Another question is whether Israel would use a U.S. strike, if it occurs, to "clear the table" across all fronts. Israeli officials say that possibility exists and must be taken into account. If attacked, Israel could seize the opportunity to act decisively against Iran, Hezbollah and the Houthis.

Israel has not formally addressed a Politico report that Trump's advisers, for domestic political reasons, urged him to ask Israel to initiate a strike on Iran. The report cannot be ruled out, and it is clear that some in the president's orbit would prefer to avoid direct U.S. entanglement and might be more comfortable with Israel taking the lead.



But such a scenario would place Israel in a difficult position. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has warned Iran that if it attacks, Israel's response will be far harsher than Tehran can imagine. In effect, he has drawn the boundaries: Israel will not initiate a war but will respond forcefully.

If the Politico report is accurate and Israel were to initiate hostilities, Iran would claim legitimacy to retaliate. Some in Israel may see an interest in launching a preemptive war to decisively

strike Iran's ballistic missile program, especially as Washington appears focused primarily on the nuclear issue rather than the missile threat that most concerns Israel.

Still, based on the current U.S. military deployment, Israeli officials say it does not appear that Washington expects Israel to go first. It is more plausible, they say, that if there is a U.S. strike there would be a division of labor and joint action as force multipliers. The recent arrival of 12 U.S. F-22 stealth fighter jets at an air base in southern Israel, they add, is not the behavior of a superpower expecting Israel to initiate the conf

<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/rjeodxcdwe#autoplay>

Nuke talks resume even as US F-22s crowd Israeli skies

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-Png5VNDhY>

US, Iran said to agree to further talks next week, as mediator claims progress

Contradictory reports emerge on whether sides any closer to agreement; report says Witkoff, Kushner demanded Tehran dismantle all nuclear sites and turn over enriched uranium

By [Agencies](#), [Tol Staff](#), [Jacob Magid](#), [Stav Levaton](#), [Emanuel Fabian](#) and [Nava Freiberg](#)

Today, 11:23 pm



In this handout photo released by the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs on February 26, 2026, US special envoy Steve Witkoff (center) and Jared Kushner hold a meeting with Oman's Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi (right) in Geneva. (Omani Foreign Ministry / AFP)

The United States and Iran made significant progress in talks on Thursday aimed at resolving a longstanding nuclear dispute and averting new US strikes, mediator Oman said, amid Washington's large-scale military buildup in the Middle East.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told state TV that the talks "made very good progress and entered into the elements of an agreement very seriously, both in the nuclear field and in the sanctions field." He said the next round would take place in "perhaps less than a week," with technical talks at the UN's nuclear agency to begin in Vienna on Monday.

A US official described the talks to Axios as "positive."

The upbeat assessments appeared to contradict earlier reports of American disappointment over the Iranian position, as well as comments made anonymously to various Hebrew media outlets by senior Israeli officials that the gap between the sides appeared increasingly unbridgeable, and that a US strike seemed more and more likely.

[The Wall Street Journal](#), meanwhile, gave a less rosy assessment on Thursday evening, describing the sides as "still far apart on key issues."

The cause for the discrepancies was not immediately clear.

After the day's talks ended in Switzerland, Omani Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr Albusaidi said in a post on X that the two sides planned to resume negotiations soon after consultations in their countries' capitals, with technical-level discussions scheduled to take place next week in Vienna. The Omani minister's assessment of progress followed indirect talks between Araghchi and US envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner in Geneva, with one session in the morning and the second in the afternoon.

"We have finished the day after significant progress in the negotiation between the United States and Iran," Badr Albusaidi said.

Describing the talks as some of the most serious that Iran has had with the US, Araghchi told Iranian state television: "We reached agreement on some issues, and there are differences regarding some other issues."

"It was decided that the next round of negotiations will take place soon, in less than a week," he said, adding the Iranians had clearly expressed their demand for sanctions relief.

There was no immediate comment from US negotiating team on the outcome of the talks.

[Axios](#) had reported earlier that Witkoff and Kushner were "disappointed" by the Iranians' positions after the morning session, but at the day's conclusion, a source described the talks as "positive." The negotiations – which were mediated by Albusaidi and included UN nuclear watchdog chief Rafael Grossi, according to several reports – lasted several hours and included both direct and indirect exchanges, according to Axios.



A handout picture provided by the Iranian Foreign Ministry on February 26, 2026, shows Iranian diplomats and delegation during the Iran and US talks in Geneva, Switzerland. (IRANIAN FOREIGN MINISTRY / AFP)

According to Israel's Channel 12, Iran offered to limit uranium enrichment to medical needs, while nuclear activity would cease for an unspecified, limited number of years, and enrichment would later resume under a regulated regional framework.

The US, for its part, was said to be demanding a deal without a time limit.

Washington is willing to allow low-level enrichment at a Tehran research reactor, but is insisting on the full dismantlement of all of Iran's other nuclear facilities and the transfer of all enriched uranium out of the country, according to the TV report.

The report on US demands of Iran appeared to largely mirror the Journal's account.

The discussions about the decades-long dispute over Iran's nuclear work come as fears grow of a Middle East conflagration. Trump has repeatedly threatened action if there is no deal and the US military has amassed its forces in waters near the Islamic Republic.

The apparent decision to schedule a future round of negotiations would suggest that enough progress was made for the US to hold off on long-threatened military strikes. However, in June 2025, Omani mediators had also scheduled a round of nuclear talks that never materialized, as Jerusalem — with American blessing — launched a campaign targeting Iran's nuclear and missile programs.



In this handout photo released by Iran's Foreign Ministry on February 26, 2026, Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi (L) speaks with Oman's Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi during their meeting in Geneva. (Iran's Foreign Ministry / AFP)

The negotiations on Thursday marked the third round of nuclear talks with the US in recent weeks.

The negotiators initially met for some three hours, then paused for a break. During the first session, the Iranians presented their draft proposal for a deal, according to [Axios](#).

When the talks paused, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Esmail Baqaei told state TV that “both delegations needed to carry out consultations with their respective capitals.”

An Iranian official told Al Jazeera during the break that Tehran's representatives had rejected the full dismantlement of its nuclear program, and the shipping away of all enriched uranium.

“Our proposal in Geneva is politically serious, technically creative, and includes everything required to reach an agreement immediately,” the Iranian official told the Qatari network.



Iranians walk past an anti-US mural next to the former US embassy in Tehran on February 26, 2026. (AFP)

Iran – which denies any desire to acquire a nuclear weapon, but has enriched uranium to levels far beyond what's required for civilian use, and obstructed inspections of its nuclear sites – has publicly resisted demands that it stop enrichment entirely.

The Islamic Republic has also said it will not discuss anything other than its nuclear program and sanctions relief in exchange. The US, however, has repeatedly pressed for talks to also address Iran's ballistic missile program and its support for

regional terror proxies.

A senior Iranian official told Reuters on Thursday, prior to the talks, that the sides could reach a framework for a deal if Washington were to separate “nuclear and non-nuclear issues,” but added that remaining gaps need to be narrowed during the third round.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said on Wednesday that Iran's refusal to discuss its ballistic missile program was a “big problem” that would have to be addressed eventually. The missiles were “designed solely to strike America” and pose a threat to regional stability, he said.

US sends even more planes to region

While the talks were held in Geneva, the US continued to send warplanes to the Middle East, amid its largest buildup of forces in the region since the eve of the 2003 invasion of Iraq – though this build-up, unlike that one, has not included significant numbers of ground troops.

In recent weeks, dozens of fighter jets — including F-35s, F-22s, F-15s, and F-16s — have been spotted heading to the Middle East by the Military Air Tracking Alliance, a team of about 30 open-source analysts that routinely analyzes military and government flight activity.

Six more American refueling tankers were scheduled to head for Israel's Ben Gurion Airport on Thursday, according to analysts monitoring open-source flight tracking data. Five American KC-46 refueling planes were reportedly set to depart Portsmouth International Airport in New Hampshire, and a sixth tanker to depart from Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in North Carolina. All were expected to land at Ben Gurion Airport.

This week, several American refuelers and cargo planes were spotted at Ben Gurion, and 11 F-22 stealth fighter jets — along with accompanying logistical support planes and aircrews — also landed at Ovda Airbase in

southern Israel.

The deployment of US fighter jets at Israeli airbases for operational activities — rather than for joint training with the IAF — is extremely rare.

Images published by Chinese intelligence firm MizarVison provided visual confirmation of the F-22s at the airbase, along with what appeared to be the deployment of an air defense system in the area, which MizarVision labeled a Patriot model.

According to analysts monitoring open-source flight tracking data, another 12 F-22s arrived at Royal Air Force Lakenheath airbase in England on Wednesday.

The additional 12 F-22s, along with another one that had a technical issue and was meant to be delivered with the earlier batch, were all expected to later head to Israel and be deployed at the same IAF airbase, eventually bringing the total number of American stealth fighters stationed in Israel to 24.

The F-22, operated exclusively by the US Air Force, is the world's most advanced air-superiority fighter, built for unmatched speed, maneuverability, and stealth in air-to-air combat.

Additionally, the USS Gerald R. Ford, the world's largest aircraft carrier, departed the Greek island of Crete, where it had made a supply stop on its way to the Middle East. Another US carrier – the USS Abraham Lincoln – is already in the region.



The US Navy aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford departs Souda Bay on the island of Crete on February 26, 2026. (Costas METAXAKIS / AFP)

In January, amid mass anti-government protests in Iran, Trump threatened to intervene if the regime were to kill protesters. The regime killed thousands of protesters shortly thereafter. Since then, Trump has mostly shifted attention to the Islamic Republic's nuclear program, warning that “bad things” will happen if Iran doesn't agree to a deal on it. Iran's main nuclear sites were hit by US and Israeli strikes in June 2025, causing significant damage above ground. But it's unclear whether enriched uranium was spirited away before they were hit or buried underground. Iran says it has been

unable to enrich since then, but it has also barred inspections. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-iran-said-to-agree-to-further-talks-next-week-as-mediator-claims-progress/>

Departing Israel, Modi says there's 'no place for terrorism,' praises Gaza peace plan *Netanyahu says India and Israel 'bent on innovation,' with concrete plans to cooperate in agriculture and tech, as countries sign 16 bilateral memorandums of understanding*

By [Nava Freiberg](#),

[Agencies](#) and [Lazar Berman](#)

Today, 4:46 pm

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi meet in Jerusalem alongside top ministers and advisers, February 26, 2026. (Roey Avraham/GPO); President Isaac Herzog and Prime Minister Modi meet at the president's residence in Jerusalem. (Avi Kaner/GPO); PM Modi and PM Netanyahu hold a joint press conference at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. (GPO)

[Go to website for video rdb](#)

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi departed Israel Thursday afternoon following a packed two-day visit to Israel, during which he said Jerusalem and New Delhi agree that there is “no place for terrorism in the world.”

The trip was Modi's second visit to Israel as prime minister since he took office in 2014. On Wednesday, he addressed the Knesset amid a series of meetings with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other officials.

“India and Israel are clear that there is no place for terrorism in the world, in any form... We will oppose it shoulder to shoulder. We will always oppose it in the future,” Modi said at a Thursday press conference with Netanyahu in Jerusalem. “Humanity must never become a victim of conflict.”

Modi said that the US-backed “Gaza peace plan has opened a pathway to peace, and India has extended its full support to these efforts.”

He also spoke of future cooperation between Israel and India in a variety of fields, including technology and energy.

At the event, the two countries signed 16 bilateral memorandums of understanding, primarily in the fields of innovation and technology.

Speaking alongside Modi, Netanyahu described the Indian leader's visit as "amazing" and "extraordinarily productive," and also spoke about joint innovation between the two countries.

"We're proud ancient civilizations, very proud of our past. But absolutely determined to seize the future, and we can do it better together," he said.



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi meet in Jerusalem alongside top ministers and advisers, February 26, 2026. (Maayan Toaf/GPO)

Following an expanded meeting with their teams, Netanyahu said, "We spoke about cooperation with the extraordinarily talented people of India and our people, and we're working this into concrete plans."

He highlighted "precision agriculture" and "software and AI" as fields that the two countries plan to collaborate on.

"Israel and India are bent on innovation," Netanyahu continued, adding that the countries also plan to increase cooperation between their governments: "We've decided

to have a [government-to-government] meeting in India as soon as we can arrange it."

Netanyahu reiterated his personal connection with Modi, telling him "how deeply and from the heart we feel both our personal friendship and the friendship between our governments and our peoples, and may this continue and flourish and strengthen, as I'm sure it will as a result of this visit."

Modi noted that the pair had "extensive discussions on regional and global issues. Promoting regional connectivity, we will advance with renewed momentum on initiatives such as the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and India–Israel–UAE–USA (I2U2)," he said, according to the Indo-Asian News Service.

He was referring to two US-backed initiatives: the IMEC transport corridor, which aims to connect India to Europe via the Middle East by sea and rail, and I2U2, a strategic partnership between India, Israel, the UAE, and the

US centered around economic, technological, energy, and food security cooperation to promote regional stability.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, seen at a joint press conference at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, February 26, 2026. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)



An Indian Foreign Ministry statement said the two countries would cooperate in the field of "horizon scanning," which would enhance India's strategic capabilities. This would help strengthen strategic foresight, risk assessment, and technology planning through joint research, capacity building and AI-driven tools, it said.

Israel will allow 50,000 additional Indian workers into the country over the next five years, especially in manufacturing sectors, the statement said.

In a joint written statement released by Netanyahu's office, the two countries affirmed their "special strategic partnership for peace, innovation, and prosperity."

The statement outlined the countries' commitment to and plans for cooperation on defense and security, technology and innovation, cybersecurity, trade, investment and connectivity, agriculture, water and environmental protection, combating terror, promoting peace, parliamentary cooperation, people-to-people collaboration, health, education, and global trade.

Following their final meetings and the press conference, Netanyahu escorted Modi to Ben Gurion Airport, where they took part in a farewell ceremony on the tarmac before the Indian leader departed.



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi lays a wreath and a rock at the Hall of Remembrance during his visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Museum in Jerusalem, February 26, 2026. (AP/Leo Correa)

Earlier Thursday, Modi and Netanyahu visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem together.
Advertisement

According to the Prime Minister's Office, Netanyahu showed Modi the names of Holocaust victims from the family of his wife, Sara, after which Modi laid a wreath in Yad Vashem's Hall of Remembrance.

Modi also met with President Isaac Herzog, and the pair planted an oak tree together in the garden outside the president's residence in Jerusalem.

The Indian prime minister invited Herzog to visit India and the president readily accepted, according to the president's office.



President Isaac Herzog (right) and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi plant a tree at the president's residence in Jerusalem on February 26, 2026. (Oren Ben-Haakon/GPO)

"India is an essential part of the great future of the Middle East, and the Middle East is an essential part of the great future of India," Herzog told the visiting leader. "We know that you lead the world in so many fields, and we are very moved and excited that you're here with us."

Modi told the president that "the India-Israel relationship, across the sectors, can do a lot for the global good. India is also implementing a lot of good Israeli solutions in our country, and we have had great results."

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/departing-israel-modi-says-theres-no-place-for-terrorism-praises-gaza-peace-plan/>

Bithonistim NGO: Gaza war must end with IDF defeat of Hamas, not Indonesian peacekeepers

The conference was the Bithonistim's first public presentation of its broad national security strategy, which top experts have been working on for an extended period.

By YONAH JEREMY BOB FEBRUARY 25, 2026 20:21 Updated: FEBRUARY 25, 2026 21:27



Chief of the General Staff, LTG Eyal Zamir, conducted a tour of the field in the Gaza Strip (photo credit: IDF)

"The Gaza story must end with an IDF decisive victory in Gaza, not with Indonesian peacekeepers or any other foreign forces disarming Hamas," Brig.-Gen. (res.) Danny Van Biran said at the Bithonistim (Security Experts) conference in Jerusalem.

Tuesday night's conference was the Bithonistim's first public presentation of its broad national security strategy. Top experts – most with security backgrounds and some with expertise in other arenas relevant to national security – have been working on the strategy for an extended period.

A significant part of the national security strategy presentation focused on identifying problems with Israel's recent strategy and tactics.

Maj. (res.) Omri Cohen said the main traditional strategic doctrines of deterrence and decisiveness, coined by the founding prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, have become distorted and misunderstood.

Cohen said that according to Yigal Allon, one of the founders of the Palmah and an early top commander within the IDF, "decisiveness was the basis for deterrence. Decisiveness was cumulative. But later, deterrence became its own purpose, and decisiveness was dropped."



IDF soldiers operating in the Gaza Strip, August 1, 2025. (credit: IDF SPOKESPERSON'S UNIT)

Another problem Cohen flagged was that the country's national security concept had devolved into emphasizing lower-grade tactical considerations rather than higher-level strategic ones.

In terms of tactical considerations, Cohen said the "war between the wars" campaign, in which the air force periodically bombed attempted weapons transfers to Syria and Lebanon, was at most a temporary, somewhat successful series of moves to reduce the volume of rocket and missile threats on Israel's border in Syria and Lebanon.

However, he said, much of the defense establishment and the country fell into the trap of viewing the campaign as its core strategy rather than developing a strategy to address the buildup of threats on its northeastern borders in a permanent way.

Cohen said that, given that the defense establishment had no coherent idea about how to proactively make Israel safer and achieve its long-term interests, it chose to believe that trying to contain growing threats on all of its borders was sufficient, and it has become complacent in terms of readiness for any unexpected surprise attack.

Moreover, Cohen criticized how this readiness to "accept" growing threats along the borders and the failure to imagine a possible ground invasion had led the defense establishment to improperly shrink its ground forces, especially its tank units.

Former IDF intelligence chief emphasizes importance of understanding Hamas

Former IDF intelligence analysis chief Brig.-Gen. (res.) Yossi Kuperwasser said Israel must "disarm Hamas," but asked, "Once you do that, what do you do next?"

Kuperwasser, now the head of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS), spoke about the importance of deeply understanding the many distinct ideologically anti-Israel aspects of many Palestinians' identities in a clear-eyed manner – in order to have a chance of successfully confronting them.

The former IDF intelligence analysis chief said that much of Israel had mistakenly believed that [Hamas](#) was deterred and merely wanted to improve its economic standing and quality of life.

Problematically, Kuperwasser said that much of the defense establishment was focused only on threats from Iran and Hezbollah, with Hamas's threat in the West Bank being categorized as an afterthought, and Hamas in Gaza being viewed as non-threatening for the time being.

When Kuperwasser tried to present his strategy earlier in 2023, regarding the need for a deeper operation against Hamas in Gaza, in order not to merely act in response to repeated periodic conflicts initiated by Hamas, he said that the government had told him his ideas were not relevant, since Gaza was stable and no one wanted to risk such an escalation.

Col. (res.) Ronen Itzik said that the defense establishment had forgotten that the reserve army is the country's number one national security asset.

He said that much of the country and defense officials talk about the [reservists](#) being important in theory, but then much of the country forgets about them as soon as a given war ends, and time moves along.

The Bithonistim NGO is a right-leaning group mostly of former senior security officials.

It was formed in recent years, when various former senior defense officials were frustrated by the fact that the majority of former defense officials lean politically toward the Center or the Left, even as the government has been led by the political Right. <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/defense-news/article-888002>

Berlin saw record 2,267 antisemitic crimes in 2025, report shows

The new figures in the city where the Holocaust was engineered are 'shameful,' MP Sebastian Schlüsselburg says

By [Zev Stub](#)

Today, 3:57 pm



File: Demonstrators take part in an anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian rally titled "Stop the genocide in Gaza! No weapons in war zones! Peace instead of arms race!" on September 13, 2025, at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. (John MACDOUGALL / AFP)

Police in Berlin recorded a record 2,267 antisemitic crimes in 2025, a sharp increase from 1,825 cases in 2024 and 900 in 2023, according to German daily Tagesspiegel.

The data was released by the city's Senate Department for the Interior in response to an inquiry by Social Democratic lawmaker Sebastian Schlüsselburg.

Antisemitic activity in Germany and around the world skyrocketed after Hamas launched its war against Israel on October 7, 2023. Berlin police logged just 381 antisemitic offenses in 2022, according to the report.

Antisemitic offenses categorized as motivated by foreign ideologies, related to the Middle East conflict, rose to 1,484, up from 24 in 2022. Crimes motivated by religious ideologies climbed to 348, compared to six in 2022.

Antisemitic crimes associated with right-wing extremism have remained relatively stable over the past five years, at around 300 cases annually, the report said. There were 327 in 2025.

The attacks range from hate speech and incitement to property damage, threats and physical assaults. Jewish institutions, including synagogues, schools and community centers, have faced heightened security concerns since the October 7 attacks. Authorities have increased police patrols around some sites and expanded monitoring of demonstrations where antisemitic slogans have been reported.

Most incidents occurred in the districts of Mitte, Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, Tempelhof-Schöneberg, Neukölln and Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf, the report noted.

The surge comes despite Germany's longstanding reputation as one of the more pro-Israel countries in Europe, rooted in its historical responsibility for the Holocaust. German leaders have repeatedly affirmed their commitment to combating antisemitism and safeguarding Jewish life as a core national obligation.



German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, 2nd right, and his wife, Elke Buedenbender, light a fire during a vigil for the victims of the terror attack at Australia's Bondi Beach, Berlin, Germany, December 14, 2025. (AP/ Markus Schreiber)

"The current figures on antisemitic crimes in Berlin are shameful," Schlüsselburg told Tagesspiegel. "Especially here, in the city where the crime against humanity known as the Shoah was planned and ordered, we bear a special historical responsibility to protect Jewish life."

The data for Berlin fits into the wider picture of rising antisemitism across Germany. The Research and Information Center on Antisemitism (RIAS), an independent watchdog, documented 8,627 antisemitic incidents in 2024, a 77% increase from the previous year.

"Since October 7, every sense of security in the Jewish community has vanished," Hamburg's antisemitism commissioner Stefan Hensel, the only Jewish official in such a role in any German state, [told](#) The Times of Israel in December. Hensel stepped down at the end of the year, saying a wave of hatred and a lack of political backing made his job untenable.

Berlin's Jewish community is the largest in Germany, although estimates of the population's size vary. About 10,000-12,000 people are registered as members of the Jewish community, but some estimate the total number of Jews in the city to be between 25,000 and 40,000.

The country as a whole has 90,000 to 95,000 Jews registered with a synagogue or community, but the total population is estimated at closer to 250,000. Disparities in the numbers are attributed to a large number of Israeli expats who have moved in recent years but choose not to pay the [Kirchensteuer](#) (church tax) to register with a religious community, as well as an influx of people from the former Soviet Union since 1990.

Jewish community leaders have repeatedly warned that rising hostility has left many Jews feeling unsafe in public spaces, including when wearing visible religious symbols. German officials have vowed to crack down on hate crimes and strengthen educational and prevention programs, saying Berlin must ensure that Jewish life can flourish openly in the capital. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/berlin-saw-record-2267-antisemitic-crimes-in-2025-report-shows/>

Parisian Jewish family ordered to remove mezuzah from apartment door by building management

The family was told they have 15 days to remove the mezuzah, with the management company saying it had been put up "without any authorization."

By [MATHILDA HELLER](#) FEBRUARY 26, 2026 16:18 Updated: FEBRUARY 26, 2026 16:19

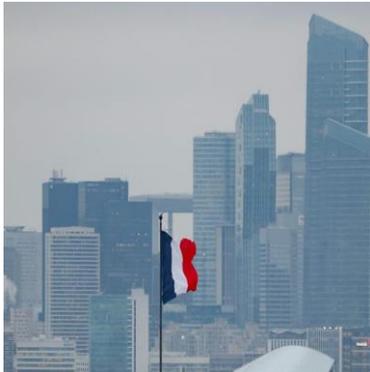


Mezuzah at the entrance to the O Laffa kosher restaurant owned by a couple belonging to the Jewish community and vandalized by an anti-Semitic act on the night of September 2 to 3 in Villeurbanne, France on September 24, 2024. (photo credit: Antoine Boureau / Hans Lucas / Hans Lucas via AFP)

A Parisian Jewish family has been ordered by their building's management to remove the mezuzah from their doorway.

In an official letter, the L'Ami Immobilier Conseil agency of the company Century 21 formally requested that the family remove the item and "restore the door frame to its original condition within fifteen days from receipt of this letter."

The property company said the mezuzah had been installed on the exterior frame of the apartment door in Villeneuve-la-Garenne "without any authorization."



This photograph shows a French flag fluttering with the La Defense business district in the background skyline, in Paris, on December 5, 2025. (credit: IAN LANGSDON/AFP via Getty Images)

The company said that the exterior frame of landing doors constitutes a common area of the building, and that any modification, regardless of its nature, requires prior authorization from the general assembly of co-owners. The letter accused the family of contravening Article 9 of the Law of July 10, 1965, which requires each co-owner to use the common areas without infringing upon the rights of other co-owners or affecting the building's purpose and aesthetic appearance.

Consequences if the family doesn't comply

If the family fails to return the door to its original condition within this time period, the co-owners' association can carry out restoration work at the "exclusive expense of the co-owner concerned, without prejudice to any claim for damages."

The company claimed the letter was sent "independently of any personal or [religious](#) consideration" and was made solely to comply with the co-ownership rules and applicable regulations.

In response to various tweets on the subject, Century 21 posted a statement saying its customer service department is handling the matter and "has already contacted the agency in order to determine the circumstances under which this letter was sent."

"Century 21 France obviously does not endorse this type of letter, and even less any form of [discrimination](#)," the company said, urging people to wait for a response from the agency and its explanations. <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/article-888130>

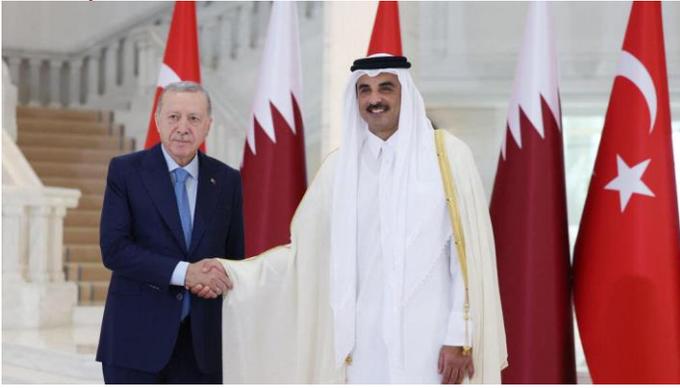
Qatari funding, Hamas ties: How the Muslim Brotherhood fuels antisemitism across Europe

Groups aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood operate across Europe with Hamas ties and funding from Turkey and Qatar, promoting antisemitism and anti-Israel incitement; intelligence services warn of the threat despite ongoing government cooperation

[Itamar Eichner](#) | 10:17

Israel's Ministry for Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism on Thursday released a report alleging that the Muslim Brotherhood is working across Europe to fuel antisemitism and efforts to delegitimize Israel while maintaining ties to Hamas, which is designated as a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union.

The report says a broad European network of organizations linked directly or indirectly to the Muslim Brotherhood operates in Sweden, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Spain, Ireland and other countries. According to the ministry, the groups help finance the Islamist movement and maintain direct and indirect connections to terrorist organizations, with an emphasis on Hamas.



*Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani
(Photo: AFP PHOTO / TURKISH PRESIDENCY PRESS OFFICE)*

The ministry said intelligence agencies and governments in Western Europe are aware of what it described as the threat posed by the Muslim Brotherhood. Security services across Europe view the network of organizations affiliated with the movement as inherently anti-democratic and seeking to fundamentally reshape society and governance, the report said. Despite that, it said, several governments continue to engage in dialogue

and cooperation with such bodies.

Among the organizations cited is Interpal, a British-based charity that has been designated by the United States as a terrorist organization. The report says Interpal is headed by Ibrahim Hewitt, a British convert to Islam who has denied the Holocaust and promotes a strict interpretation of Islamic law, and Issam Youssef Mustafa, whom it describes as a key figure linking the organization to the broader Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas networks worldwide.

According to a U.S. Treasury Department report cited by the ministry, Mustafa served on Hamas' executive committee in 2007 under then-leader Khaled Mashaal. He also operated alongside the late Sheikh al-Qaradawi when Qaradawi headed the Union of Good, a coalition of charities that the United States has designated as supporting Hamas. The ministry report says Mustafa strengthened ties between Interpal and the Muslim Brotherhood's European network.

Interpal relies on public donations, the report said. It raised about 7.03 million British pounds (\$8.9 million) in 2018 and 5.54 million pounds (\$7 million) in 2019. In 2023, after being designated as a terrorist organization, its donation income fell to 92,581 pounds (\$117,000), according to the report.



Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi with Ismail Haniyeh (Photo: Reuters)

The ministry also cited the Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organizations, or FEMYSO. A 2025 French intelligence report identified FEMYSO as the youth arm of the Council of European Muslims and described it as a training platform for potential senior figures in the Muslim Brotherhood, according to the Israeli report. Since 2016, FEMYSO has received more than 1 million euros (\$1.1 million) annually in funding from Qatar, it said.

Another body mentioned is the European Institute of Human Sciences, known as IESH, which was previously headed by Qaradawi, who died in 2022. The institute is now led by Mohamed Karmous, described in the report as a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Since 2007, IESH has received millions of dollars in donations from Qatar, according to the ministry. The report said security and government officials in several countries have warned that content and positions promoted by IESH at times contradict democratic values, individual rights and accepted norms.

The ministry warned of what it called a direct threat to Jewish communities in Europe stemming from

indirect and ongoing support for terrorist organizations, including Hamas, through networks of charities and umbrella groups such as Interpal and the Union of Good. It also cited what it described as the normalization of antisemitism and religious-political incitement.

In addition, the report alleged a systematic campaign to delegitimize Israel in Europe through advocacy coalitions, cooperation with pro-Palestinian organizations, public opinion campaigns, indirect fundraising for Israel's adversaries and efforts to influence political and public discourse in ways that deny Israel's right to self-determination and sovereignty.



Members of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Jordan (Photo: AFP)

Diaspora Affairs Minister [Amichai Chikli](#) said ignoring the issue would come at a cost. "Those who close their eyes today will pay tomorrow in the security of their citizens and in Jewish lives," Chikli said. "The Muslim Brotherhood is not a civil society movement. It is a mechanism for infiltrating extremism and terror into the heart of Europe. Behind a facade of 'moderation' lies a network with ties to Hamas and foreign funding that undermines democracies from within. Europe should

wake up."

Avi Cohen-Scali, director general of the ministry, said the movement operates in Europe through methods that appear outwardly moderate and pragmatic. "Despite its outwardly 'moderate' approach, the organization consistently rejects the principles of liberal democracy and Western values, which do not align with its radical ideological goals, including, at times, the Islamization of Europe," he said.

<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/hkiq5yr0011l>

Progressive Jews sound alarm over bill cementing Orthodox control of Western Wall Diaspora leaders warn criminalizing non-Orthodox prayer at the Wall will exclude many from Judaism's holiest site, violate World Zionist Organization resolutions

By [Zev Stub](#)

26 February 2026, 11:09 pm



Illustrative: A boy reads from the Torah as part of his barmitzvah at the Western Wall's egalitarian section in Jerusalem on November 17, 2022. (Egalitarian section/Facebook)

Progressive Jewish movements in the Diaspora are outraged about a bill that could ban and criminalize non-Orthodox prayer at the Western Wall.

Lawmakers voted 56-47 Wednesday afternoon in favor of a preliminary reading of a bill giving the Chief Rabbinate full control over prayer at all parts of the Western Wall. The bill, sponsored by far-right Noam MK Avi Maoz, is intended to undercut a ruling last week by the High

Court of Justice that the state must move forward with the upgrade of the Western Wall egalitarian plaza, which would allow non-Orthodox prayers at a lesser-used portion of the holy site.

The new bill would give the country's two chief rabbis, both Orthodox, ultimate authority over Jewish holy sites, including the so-called Ezrat Israel plaza, which has been designated as an egalitarian prayer area. It would define The law currently states that desecration of a holy place carries a penalty of seven years in prison.

"This proposed legislation is profoundly alarming," said Rabbi Charley Baginsky and Rabbi Josh Levy, co-leads of the Movement for Progressive Judaism (MPJ) in the United Kingdom. "The Western Wall is not the property

of one stream of Judaism, nor of one political coalition. It is a sacred national site that belongs to the entire Jewish people.”

“Successive Israeli governments have already recognized this principle,” they continued in a statement. “Agreements were reached to ensure space for egalitarian prayer at the Kotel, and those commitments were reinforced through decisions of the World Zionist Organization and Jewish Agency institutions representing world Jewry.

“Advancing legislation that would effectively outlaw egalitarian worship does not simply change policy – it risks breaking faith with millions of Jews in Israel and across the Diaspora,” the two concluded. “Religious freedom and equality at holy sites are not marginal concerns; they are central to the relationship between Israel and world Jewry.”



A Jewish man prays at the mixed-gender prayer section at the Western Wall in Jerusalem's Old City, December 4, 2025 (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

Rabbi Lea Mühlstein, immediate past chair of Arzenu, the political wing of Reform and Progressive Zionists worldwide, charged that the legislation violates previous resolutions by Jewish bodies.

“At the World Zionist Congress in October, our coalition passed a resolution calling on the Israeli government to reopen the egalitarian section of the Kotel and allow all streams of Judaism to practice and pray at the Western Wall,” she wrote. “The Israeli Supreme Court agrees with us, demanding in a ruling last week that the government

fulfil its commitment to provide an accessible and adequate space for egalitarian prayer at the Kotel.”

“We will not stand by and let this happen,” Mühlstein vowed. “Our representatives in Israel’s National Institutions, together with Progressive Jews from across the world, will continue our fight for religious pluralism in Israel.”

World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) president Sergio Bergman, meanwhile, expressed concerns about the broader implications of the bill.

“The issue at hand extends beyond the Kotel, representing a symptom of a deeper underlying concern,” Bergman said. “For Israel to fulfil its role as a Jewish state for all Jewish people, it is imperative that it does not transition into a messianic fundamentalist theocracy. One can readily envision a scenario where the ultra-Orthodox Jewish fundamentalist ideology within Israel could lead to a governance structure akin to the current regime in Iran, where the ayatollahs govern and oppress their citizens.”



Reform rabbis and supporters of Women of the Wall march to the Western Wall with a sign protesting a bill that would criminalize women wearing prayer shawls at the holy site, on February 22, 2023. (Central Conference of American Rabbis)

MPJ, Arzenu, Arza, and WUPJ launched a [campaign](#) calling on their members to contact Israeli Embassies in their country and demand action against the bill.

The American Jewish Committee said in a statement that the Western Wall and its surrounding prayer spaces “belong to the entirety of the Jewish people.”

“AJC long advocated for the creation of the egalitarian prayer space near Robinson’s Arch, which has allowed all Jews to connect with Judaism’s holiest site in accordance with their traditions,” the organization said.

“Preserving this space—and the promise of access, dignity, and inclusion it represents—is essential to honoring both the diversity and unity of the Jewish people. We expect the Israeli government to uphold its previous commitments in this regard.”

The Jewish Federations of North America, meanwhile, declined to make a public statement on the bill, but noted that it is “fully engaged on the issue.”

any activity at the site contrary to their instructions, such as non-Orthodox worship, as a “desecration.”

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/progressive-jews-sound-alarm-over-bill-cementing-orthodox-control-of-western-wall/> **This battle has raged for 70 years.rdb**

UN rights chief says Taliban decree expands executions, deepens repression

The Taliban has restricted women's movements and barred girls from education beyond primary school since coming to power in 2021, via a series of morality laws limiting expression and employment.

ByREUTERSFEBRUARY 26, 2026 16:38



An Afghan Taliban fighter sits on a tank near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in Spin Boldak, Kandahar Province, following exchanges of fire between Pakistani and Afghan forces(photo credit: REUTERS/STRINGER)

A new decree from Afghanistan's Taliban government is set to further crush rights and freedoms in the war-torn nation, especially for women, UN human rights chief Volker Turk said on Thursday.

The Taliban has restricted women's movements and barred girls from education beyond primary school since coming to power in 2021, via a series of morality laws that also limit

expression and employment.



Turk, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, said a decree signed by Taliban supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada last month "defines several crimes and punishments that contravene Afghanistan's international legal obligations."

"It provides for the use of corporal punishment for numerous offenses, including in the home, legitimizing violence against women and children," he told a [Human Rights Council](#) meeting in Geneva.

"The decree, which is expected to come into effect soon, extends the number of offenses that carry the death penalty."

Nadim Yousify, a former US Marine Corps platoon sergeant and Afghan national, holds a photo of what he describes as the Taliban treatment of the family members of Afghans who helped U.S. forces, during a joint subcommittee hearing of the

Senate Judiciary Committee (credit: REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst TPX IMAGES OF THE DAY)

Decree violates freedom of expression, assembly

The decree also criminalizes criticism of the de facto leadership and its policies, in violation of freedom of expression and assembly, he said.

Detailed provisions of the decree have not been officially published by the Taliban's Ministry of Justice or Supreme Court, and Reuters has not been able to obtain the text from officials.

The Afghan administration did not respond to an immediate request for comment.

Turk urged the Taliban to rescind the decree, impose a moratorium on executions, and end corporal punishment, saying women and girls face persecution under a system he likened to gender apartheid. The Taliban says women's rights are internal matters and should be addressed locally.

Turk said the killing of 13 civilians in recent Pakistani airstrikes highlights the need for urgent political dialogue over further escalation.

"I am very concerned by a sharp increase in civilian casualties in cross-border clashes with Pakistani military forces," he said.

Pakistan has said it launched airstrikes inside Afghanistan targeting militant safe havens, an allegation Kabul has repeatedly denied. The Taliban authorities condemned the strikes as a violation of Afghanistan's sovereignty and said they would respond at what they described as an appropriate time.

<https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-888133>

OP ED

Did DEI Cause D.C. Sewage Disaster?

Tue, 24 Feb 2026 7:39 AM PST by Daniel Greenfield



After complaining about a water industry that was terrible because it “had too many white men at the top”, DC Water CEO David Gadis bragged that, “My executive team, you know, looks exactly like the community... people of color.”

7 out of 9 members of the DC Water leadership team are black. 5 are women.

This hasn’t done anything to get the sewage back in the pipe. Or decontaminate the Potomac.

The DC Water 2023 report was titled ‘Water Equity for All’ and had Gadis bragging that “in recent years, DC Water has established itself as the national gold standard when it comes to delivering water equity.”

DC Water is now at the epicenter of the massive Potomac sewage spill in which hundreds of millions of gallons of wastewater poured into the river in one of the worst sewage spills in American history. But at least the D.C. Water’s executive team “looks exactly like the community” whose lives they’re wrecking.

Or do they?

CEO Gadis had pitched his focus on contracting with “minority and women-owned businesses”. The report promised that “infrastructure decisions” would be made “equitably” so that rather than just analyzing “the risks of infrastructure failures”, the Authority would be looking at them within the context of social and environmental vulnerabilities” and would “protect the needs of the most vulnerable communities from impacts such as flooding and sewage overflows.”

Did DC Water let the Potomac disaster happen because it prioritized sewage management around equity and the ‘Interceptor’ that dumped massive amounts of sewage may have been seen as a risk, but not a sufficient risk to a sufficiently diverse “vulnerable community”?

The areas affected by the sewage spill are primarily in Montgomery County which are less ‘diverse’ than D.C. itself with only a 18% black population and nearly half white population.

Did DC Water prioritize infrastructure risks to more properly ‘diverse’ areas leading to this disaster? Even with the disaster underway, DC Water has been accused of stonewalling and [refusing to cooperate](#) with other agencies, including the Potomac riverkeeper, trying to figure out the magnitude of the disaster. That is highly suspicious behavior for an innocent organization.

As federal investigators look for answers, they may want to consider starting with that question.

DC Water described its mission not as delivering water, but as “delivering equity”. Now DC Water may have “delivered equity” by filling a less diverse area with sewage.

But it’s not as if the DC Water leadership doesn’t have some experience with that sort of thing.

David Gadis, the first black CEO of a “major water utility”, had last been in the news during his tenure with Veolia Water. During that time, Veolia was accused of helping cover up the water disaster in Flint, Michigan in that city’s water crisis.

Veolia later paid out \$78 million to tens of thousands of Flint residents.

“We are honored to support your community with our technical expertise so that together we can ensure water quality for the people of the city of Flint,” Gadis had promised Flint residents.

Gadis had [assured Flint residents](#) that the water was safe even as emails mentioned the presence of lead. Why, after that disaster, did D.C. Water choose him out of 100 candidates?

One might think that the priority would be picking a CEO who wasn’t at the center of the most notorious tainted urban water crisis (including one involving minorities) in the whole country.

But as the DC Water press release mentioned, Gadis “was the first African American CEO to lead a major utility in Indianapolis.” And really, who cares about anything else?

Perhaps taking a man who had a basketball scholarship to Southern Methodist and had been “entirely focused on the prospect of a basketball career” before losing the NCAA National Tournament and then being lucky “that the abilities he developed on the basketball court—such as leadership, responsibility, and preparation—also applied well to the... water industry” was not a great plan. Even if Gadis had the supreme virtue of looking “exactly like the community.”

DC Water, like many cities, had badly aged infrastructure. Instead of focusing on that, Gadis bragged about his commitment to meaningless buzzwords like “sustainability” and “equity”.

The 'Authority' would have done better to focus on functionality and safety instead.

While DC Water focused on its "first-ever appearances at the Capital Pride Block Party", the "Women of Water" (WOW) program and celebrating "the many cultures, languages, and ethnicities represented at the Authority", a disaster was approaching that could not be met with DEI, but with real-world hard work before the Potomac river was full of sewage.

Rather than discuss the magnitude of its actual tasks, DC Water's reports redefined everything as equity. When DC Water described its water hookups, it rebranded this system as "one of the most direct ways DC Water delivers equity to customers is through the service lines that connect the water mains in the street to their homes and businesses." This cultlike Marxist language fundamentally shifted away from its actual mission to a symbolic ideological one.

And ideology, as the Soviet Union could have told the DEIRs, is no substitute for results.

DC Water may have had "82% BIPOC representation", but what it didn't have was a plan to safely move around water and sewage through a badly aging system that needed thorough overhauls and close monitoring. And sadly enough it's not at all unique in that regard.

Many government and private organizations have developed a leadership class that neglects its actual responsibilities and spends all of its time babbling about its commitments to environmental sustainability and equity to the exclusion of doing anything that might be useful.

Political virtue signaling is often a convenient cover for incompetence in failing organizations.

This politicization of everything is a systemic threat to the economy and to public safety and lives. Americans deserve organizations that prioritize their jobs, not their own politics.

Areas whose organizations drown in political sewage will eventually drown in real sewage.

Daniel Greenfield is a Shillman Journalism Fellow at the David Horowitz Freedom Center. This article previously appeared at the Center's [Front Page Magazine](#).

<https://bkdvk-zgpvh.campaign-view.com/ua/viewinbrowser>



BS"D

STEP BY STEP

STEP BY STEP: Good news is that many friends and supporters of Lev U'Neshama (Heart and Soul) donated towards the Education Fund project to provide basic school supplies for actually 350 children within our Lev U'Neshama families.

We are grateful that the school supply part of our effort has been successful.

According to the Israel Population and Statistics office, Tzfat's population is about 40,000, and one third live at the poverty level. We do what we can so at least the children within our struggling LUN families can get the things they need.

Every week we are providing new sport shoes and eye exams/eyeglasses to the children on our request list. However, previous donations are rapidly dwindling. I am reaching out now before the fund has been emptied and we will have to say "no" to additional requests.

We work with two local shoe merchants who give Lev U'Neshama a discount but they advised us the cost of the shoes has increased. Also, we work with an accredited optician in town who also gives us a discount but his cost is stable.

Lev U'Neshama is an Israeli registered non-profit charity organization, volunteer run, no business expenses whatsoever and every \$ goes into our programs.

Shoes: \$45 per pair regular and \$60 for First Steps, baby shoes.

Eye Exam/Eyeglasses: \$60 per child.

Your support is urgently requested.

Or use the Zelle US to US bank transfer system (contact me at mortsmo@aol.com for bank information.

US Donors may also send checks made payable to

Simcha Smolensky, my son, who is also a volunteer. Send to:

Rabbi Simcha Smolensky, 6739 N Mozart St Chicago IL 60645

Your support will be appreciated.

Yaffa Smolensky