

In rare critique, top US Jewish leader warns against proposed limit on Law of Return

Conference of Presidents CEO Daroff says 'very concerned' by religious parties' call to scrap 'grandchild clause,' at conference that highlights potential strains in Israel-US ties

By [JUDAH ARI GROSS](#) November 14, 2022



Jewish immigrants fleeing Ukraine arrive at Ben Gurion airport near Tel Aviv, on March 15, 2022. (Tomer Neuberger/Flash90)

The head of a leading American Jewish organization expressed serious concerns Monday over a proposal by the presumed incoming government to severely restrict Israel's Law of Return, saying it threatened a "bedrock of Zionism."

The comments from William Daroff, head of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, marked a stark departure from his traditional reluctance to comment critically on Israeli decision-making, illustrating the level of concern in the Diaspora over plans by allies of prime minister-designate Benjamin Netanyahu to limit who can immigrate to Israel and reform other matters of religion and state .

Speaking on a panel at a conference on Israeli-US ties, Daroff stressed that he was loath to criticize the government, joking that the session was “out of time” when asked about the nascent coalition, but made an exception to address the religious parties’ demand to remove the so-called “grandchild clause” from the Law of Return.



From left, pollster Fern Oppenheim, INSS researcher Eldad Shavit, Conference of Presidents CEO William Daroff and journalist Nurit Canetti appear on stage at a conference on the Israel-US relationship in Tel Aviv on November 14, 2022. (Eran Alergant/Reut Group)

That clause allows guarantees citizenship for anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent, so long as they do not practice another religion.

“The Law of Return is a bedrock of Zionism. Our forbearers took the Nuremberg laws and said if one grandparent was enough to kill you, it’s enough to let you in,” Daroff said, referencing a commonly held, [but false](#), belief that the clause is based on the Nazi definition of who fell under Germany’s anti-Jewish laws.

The Conference of Presidents CEO added that he was “very concerned” about the moves to alter the Law of Return.

In the lead-up to and immediately following this month’s parliamentary elections, American and international Jewish groups have expressed serious

apprehensions at the prospects of a government that includes the far-right Religious Zionist party, whose leaders have made statements and taken actions against Arabs, LGBT people, and non-Orthodox Jews.

Much of the overt criticism and concerns have been raised by groups with more clearly defined political leanings, while larger legacy organizations — like the Conference of Presidents — have avoided public statements, making Daroff's remarks more significant.

The conference was organized by Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies, the Reut Group think tank, and the Israeli Institute for Economic Planning.



Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu (L) and President Isaac Herzog at the President's Residence in Jerusalem, November 13, 2022 (Kobi Gideon/GPO)

In a recorded statement to open the conference, President Isaac Herzog blamed growing strains in Israel-US ties and the relationship between Israel and young American Jews on a lack of understanding, explaining that Israeli politicians often make far-reaching pronouncements while campaigning, but generally moderate, once in power.

“What Israeli democracy is must be explained, Israel’s diversity must be explained, the difference between rhetoric and actions must be explained, and the fact that what you see from here, you don’t see from there must be explained,” Herzog said.

The president specifically criticized an article written by New York Times commentator Thomas Friedman following this month’s Knesset election, in which the veteran journalist [lamented](#) that “the Israel we knew is gone.” Herzog, who has attempted to ease concerns over the next government’s makeup of right-wing, far-right and ultra-Orthodox parties, said the article “caused us a great wrong after the election.”

Eldad Shavit, a senior fellow at the INSS and long-time researcher of Israeli-American ties, also said that there was no need for immediate panic, that the relationship was still strong, but he warned that this could change.

“The US government accepts the democratic process in Israel and will see what happens and not act purely based on statements made during the campaign,” Shavit said.



UTJ leader MK Moshe Gafni arrives at coalition talks in Jerusalem on November 6, 2022. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

“But will the government take steps that harm human rights and minority rights or take steps against the Palestinians? If that happens, it will be difficult to maintain an intimate relationship with the [Biden] administration,” he said.

Shavit also stressed that Israel primarily needs to be focused on preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, something that it needs the United States’ help to do.

“Things that damage the relationship [with the US] on issues besides Iran can also have an effect on Iran,” he said.

Daroff stressed the security ramifications of the Israel-US relationship, as well.

“While the IDF is an incredible force providing for Israel’s security, Israel’s security does not rest alone on the shoulders of Israel. Israel is bolstered by the rock-solid American guaranteed to come to its defense,” he said.

Pollster Fern Oppenheim, who works with a variety of pro-Israel groups, warned against becoming complacent, despite the fact that polls regularly show that a majority of Americans support Israel.

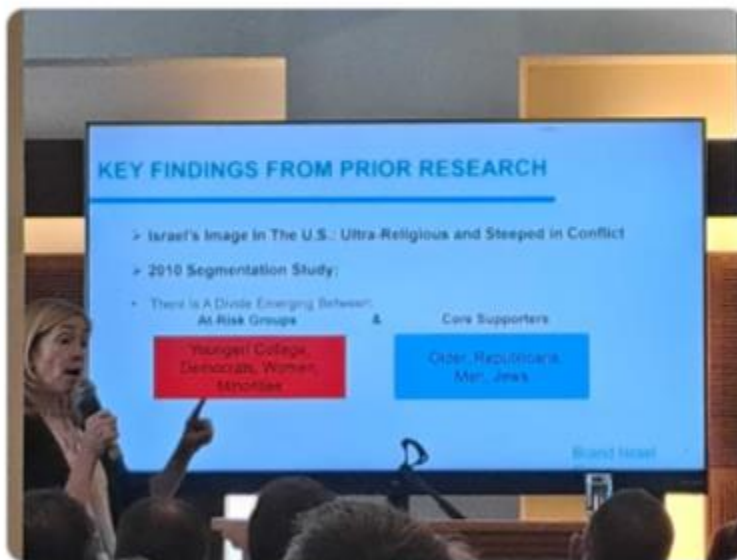


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Marketer Fern Oppenheim says numbers showing majority US support for Israel are “meaningless” as it mostly comes from old people/Jews/white people/men, with far less from women/minorities/young people

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Citing data collected in 2010 and 2016, Oppenheim said those figures are “meaningless” as support for Israel is only high in certain demographics — Jews, men, the elderly, white people, Evangelical Christians — and is far lower in others: women, people of color, young people.

“The [majority support] is meaningless. It likely means you have 80 percent on one side and 40% on the other. The problem for Israel is that this ‘other side’ represents the future of America,” she said.

“When you look at how they view Israel, Israel falls short in terms of the values that they hold dear,” Oppenheim said, specifying that this included human rights, racial tolerance, and accepting “alternative lifestyles.”

She also said that her findings show that Americans do not see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in zero-sum terms: even if Americans thought Palestinians were “the worst people in the world,” that would not translate into Americans supporting Israelis more.