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News

Legislators Push Bill for American Jewish History Museum

The proposal would help transfer the Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia to the Smithsonian Institution.

Maya Pontone March 21, 2024



The Weitzman Museum displayed the Israeli flag on its building facade in October following Hamas's October 7 attacks. Artist Deborah Kass's "OY/YO," installed in 2022, can be seen in the foreground. (photo by and courtesy the Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History)

A new bill introduced in the United States Congress yesterday, March 20, aims to establish a Smithsonian museum of American Jewish history. The legislation, which would help transfer ownership of the existing Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia to the Smithsonian Institution, is notably sponsored by vocally pro-Israel Democratic legislators Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Florida and Bob Casey of Pennsylvania.

Established in 1976, the Weitzman Museum has a history of linking Jewish identity to Israeli nationalism without critically examining Israel's occupation of Palestine. In November, the institution hosted a screening of graphic, uncensored footage from Hamas's October 7 attacks; the 43-minute film, created by the Israeli military, has led to various protests outside the venues by anti-Zionist demonstrators.

Most recently, the museum also opened an installation honoring 240 Israelis taken hostage by Hamas militants on October 7. The institution has made no apparent public statement with regard to Israel's ongoing attacks on Palestine.

While the Weitzman is already an affiliate partner of the Smithsonian, the new bill claims that its acquisition by the Smithsonian would increase visibility of Jewish-American history. A press release notes that several of the Smithsonian's 21 museums — such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the National Museum of the American Indian, and the National Museum of the American Latino — “explore and educate about America's minority communities.”



Established in 1976, the Weitzman Museum focuses on exploring American Jewish history. However, its programming has a history of connecting Jewish heritage to the Israeli state.

“Integrating the Weitzman with the Smithsonian would pay tribute to the role that the Jewish American community has played in the progress of America,” said Senator Casey, who self-describes as a “consistent and vocal advocate for robust security assistance to Israel.”

Co-leaders of the proposed legislation include Representative Brendan Boyle of Pennsylvania and Representatives Mike Turner and Max Miller of Ohio, who have all vocalized support for Israel since October 7.

Additionally, Miller helped introduce a controversial resolution equating anti-Zionism with antisemitism that was approved by the House of Representatives in early December. Other sponsors include lawmakers Susan Collins, Mike Crapo, John Fetterman, and Jacky Rosen, who have all continued to advocate unwavering support for “Israel’s right to defend itself.”

The bill has also received endorsements from pro-Israel Jewish-American organizations including the Anti-Defamation League, the Jewish Federations of North America, and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, which have been scrutinized by anti-Zionist groups for their involvement in strengthening and expanding Israel's occupation of Palestine.

The US government is currently facing mounting pressure from the public to halt military funding to Israel, which has totaled over \$14.1 billion. Over the last six months, Israeli attacks have killed over 31,819 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and decimated numerous cultural heritage sites in what various human rights groups have characterized as a genocide, sparking months of protests calling for a ceasefire in the US and around the world. Some of these actions, many led by Jewish groups critical of the Israeli government such as Jewish Voice for Peace, have criticized cultural institutions for their participation in censorship and suppression of pro-Palestine voices and for their supporters' financial ties to Israeli militarism.

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