Two Israeli Embassy staffers killed in shooting attack at Washington, DC, Jewish Museum

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Two staff members of the Israeli Embassy in Washington were shot and killed Wednesday evening while leaving an event at a Jewish museum, with police saying the suspect yelled, “Free, free Palestine” after he was arrested.

The two victims, named as as [Yaron Lischinsky and Sarah Lynn Milgrim](https://www.timesofisrael.com/yaron-lischinsky-sarah-milgrim-named-as-victims-of-washington-dc-shooting/), were leaving an event at the Capital Jewish Museum when the suspect approached a group of four people and opened fire, Metropolitan Police Chief Pamela Smith said at a news conference.

The suspect, identified as Elias Rodriguez, 30, of Chicago, was observed pacing outside the museum before the shooting. He walked into the museum after the shooting and was detained by event security, Smith said.

When he was taken into custody, Rodriguez chanted, “Free, free Palestine,” Smith said. Smith said law enforcement did not believe there was an ongoing threat to the community.

Israeli Ambassador to the US Yechiel Leiter said Lischinsky and Milgrim were a young couple about to be engaged, and Lischinsky had purchased a ring this week with the intent to propose next week in Jerusalem.

Tal Naim Cohen, a spokesperson for the embassy, said the two staff members were shot “at close range” while attending a Jewish event at the museum.

US President Donald Trump quickly condemned the shooting in a post on social media, saying: “These horrible DC killings, based obviously on antisemitism, must end, NOW! Hatred and Radicalism have no place in the USA. Condolences to the families of the victims. So sad that such things as this can happen! God Bless You ALL!’

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he was “shocked by the horrifying antisemitic murder,” and said that security will be stepped up at Israeli embassies around the world in reaction to the shooting.

In a statement by his office, Netanyahu said he was updated on the details by the Israeli ambassador to the US, and thanked Trump and other US officials “for standing clearly against antisemitism.”

“We are witnessing the terrible price of antisemitism and the wild incitement against the State of Israel,” Netanyahu said. “The blood libels against Israel are costing us blood and must be fought relentlessly.”

He added: “My heart aches with the families of the young couple, whose lives were cut short by a despicable antisemitic murderer. I have ordered security arrangements to be boosted in Israeli diplomatic missions around the world and around representatives of the state.”

President Isaac Herzog said he was “devastated” by the scenes in Washington.

“This is a despicable act of hatred, of antisemitism, which has claimed the lives of two young employees of the Israeli embassy. Our hearts are with the loved ones of those murdered and our immediate prayers are with the injured. I send my full support to the Ambassador and all the embassy staff,” Herzog said.

He added: “We stand with the Jewish community in DC and across the US. America and Israel will stand united in defense of our people and our shared values. Terror and hate will not break us.”

Foreign Minister Gideon Sa’ar called the shooting “terrible news,” writing on X that he had spoken to Leiter and was in contact with US authorities.

“Israel won’t give in to terror,” he said.

US Attorney General Pam Bondi said she was at the scene with former judge Jeanine Pirro, who serves as the US attorney in Washington and whose office would prosecute the case.

It was not immediately clear whether Rodriguez had an attorney who could comment on his behalf. A telephone number listed in public records rang unanswered.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio condemned the shooting “in the strongest possible terms,” saying on X, “Our prayers are with their loved ones.”

“This was a brazen act of cowardly, antisemitic violence,” he added. “Make no mistake: we will track down those responsible and bring them to justice.”

‘Free Palestine’

Yoni Kalin and Katie Kalisher were inside the museum when they heard gunshots and a man came inside looking distressed, they said. Kalin said people came to his aid and brought him water, thinking he needed help, without realizing he was the suspect. When police arrived, he pulled out a red keffiyeh and repeatedly yelled, “Free Palestine,’” Kalin said.

“This event was about humanitarian aid,” Kalin said. “How can we actually help both the people in Gaza and the people in Israel? How can we bring together Muslims and Jews and Christians to work together to actually help innocent people? And then here he is just murdering two people in cold blood.”

The event was the American Jewish Committee’s Young Diplomats Reception, aimed at empowering Jewish leaders to advocate on behalf of critical domestic and global issues facing the Jewish community. The annual reception brings Jewish young professionals aged 22–45 together with the diplomatic community.

This year’s theme was “Turning pain into purpose.” Attendees heard from members of the Multifaith Alliance and IsraAID nonprofits on humanitarian diplomacy and how a coalition of organizations — from the region and for the region — are working together in response to humanitarian crises throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Last week, the Capital Jewish Museum was one of the local nonprofits in Washington awarded funding from a $500,000 grant program to increase its security. The museum’s leaders were concerned because it is a Jewish organization and because of its new LGBTQ exhibit, according to NBC4 Washington.

“We recognize that there are threats associated with this as well,” executive director Beatrice Gurwitz told the TV station. “And again, we want to ensure that our space is as welcoming and secure for everybody who comes here while we are exploring these stories.”

Gil Preuss, CEO of The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, said in a statement that he was horrified by the shooting and mourned the loss of the two people killed.

“Our hearts are with their families and loved ones, and with all of those who are impacted by this tragic act of antisemitic violence,” he said.

The AJC, which hosted the event at the museum, said it is “devastated,” as Jewish organizations expressed shock at the attack.

“We are devastated that an unspeakable act of violence took place outside the venue,” said AJC CEO Ted Deutch. “At this moment, as we await more information from the police about exactly what transpired, our attention and our hearts are solely with those who were harmed and their families.”

The Jewish Federations of North America said in a joint statement that it was “horrified,” adding: “Our hearts go out to the victims and to our colleagues at AJC.”

“We are working closely with the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington and our security partners to monitor the situation, gain a fuller picture of what transpired, and keep our communities informed,” it added. “The safety and security of the community is our top priority and we will not rest until that safety is fully restored.”

The shooting comes as Israel intensified its new campaign against the Hamas terror group in the Gaza Strip in a war that began with the Hamas-led invasion of southern Israel on October 7, 2023, in which attackers killed some 1,200 people and took 251 people as hostages to Gaza.

In the time since, Israel’s air and ground campaign in Gaza has killed more than 53,000 people, according to local Hamas-run health authorities, whose count can’t be verified and doesn’t differentiate between combatants and civilians.

Since the war began, antisemitic and anti-Israel attacks and incidents have surged worldwide, with Israeli embassies and Jewish communities being targeted several times over the past year and a half.