News



A man returns to his seat during the National Chanukah Menorah lighting, Thursday, Dec. 7, 2023, on the Ellipse near the White House in Washington. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin)

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President Joe Biden is hosting a White House reception the evening of Dec. 11 to mark Hanukkah, celebrating the festival of lights as he has continued to denounce rising antisemitism in the U.S. and abroad amid the Israel-Hamas war.

The president, first lady Jill Biden and second gentleman Doug Emhoff will attend the event with nearly 800 guests. Invitees include Holocaust survivors, members of Congress, state and local officials, entertainers, and leaders from across the Jewish religious denominations, the White House says.

A menorah is lit nightly during the eight-day Jewish festival, which this year is being celebrated from Dec. 7 until Dec. 15.

The White House reception will be led by Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, Senior Rabbi at Central Synagogue in New York City, and feature menorah lighting by Emhoff and White House staff that are descendants of Holocaust survivors.

Biden plans to talk about how Hanukkah is a timeless story of miracles, and that — even in dark times — we can find the light, the White House says.

The Biden administration in May announced what it called the first-ever national strategy to counter antisemitism. That laid out more than 100 actions, including a series of steps to raise awareness and understanding of antisemitism and the threat it poses around the U.S.

Still, antisemitism has only intensified in some quarters since the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas and other militants sparked Israel's ongoing war in Gaza, which faces heightened criticism for the mounting Palestinian death toll. United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has warned of an impending "humanitarian catastrophe" in Gaza and urged its members to demand an immediate humanitarian cease-fire.

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The husband of Vice President Kamala Harris, Emhoff is the first Jewish person to be the spouse of one of the country's nationally elected leaders. Last week, he presided over the lighting ceremony of a massive menorah in front of the White House to

mark Hanukkah's first night, saying then that American Jews are "feeling alone" and "in pain."

The White House supported a since-expired, temporary pause in the fighting as Hamas released some of the hostages it held in Gaza, and is pushing for another truce — but the fighting continues in the meantime.

On Dec. 9, Liz Magill, the president of the University of Pennsylvania, resigned following pressure from donors and criticism over testimony at a congressional hearing where she was unable to say under repeated questioning that calls on campus for the genocide of Jews would violate the school's conduct policy.

Universities across the U.S. have been accused of failing to protect Jewish students amid rising fears of antisemitism worldwide and fallout from the war in Gaza.

White House spokesman Andrew Bates declined to comment on Magill's decision to resign. Presidents Claudine Gay of Harvard and Sally Kornbluth of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who appeared alongside Magill, have also faced criticism. Gay has apologized for her remarks.

Bates noted that Magill issued a statement withdrawing her remarks.

"That was the right thing to do," Bates said.