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With Anti-Semitic Acts in Headlines, Cuomo Plans to Visit Israel

By JESSE MCKINLEY MARCH 1, 2017

ALBANY — Amid talk of presidential ambitions in 2020, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo will make a quick trip to Israel this weekend, at a moment when the handling of Jewish issues is percolating through the national political debate.

The announcement of the trip, made on Wednesday during a speech to Orthodox Jewish students in Albany, came on the heels of several events in which Mr. Cuomo has sought to present himself as a proactive fighter of anti-Semitism.

Earlier Wednesday, Mr. Cuomo went to a Jewish community center in Albany to denounce such behavior, citing a series of threats and acts of racist vandalism across the state, calling them “repugnant to everything we believe as New Yorkers.”

Word of the Israel trip leaked shortly after. In his remarks to students, the governor said the short trip would be focused on economic development.

But its timing also seems ripe politically. Mr. Cuomo, a Democrat, has been rumored to have higher political goals, and he has increasingly spoken out on national issues like middle-class economic relief. Last week, he traveled to Washington and rubbed elbows with fellow Democrats at the National Governors Association winter meeting.

The Israel trip also comes as President Trump navigates a surge in anti-Semitism and his recent acknowledgment that he would consider a so-called one-state solution to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

For his part, Mr. Cuomo spoke passionately on Wednesday against anti-Semitic acts, attributing them to economic disenfranchisement and xenophobia.

“They’re angry and they’re ignorant,” he said. “So you put those two things together and you get the lashing out and the bigotry and the meanness and the cowardice you see in these threats.”

The trip’s sudden appearance on the governor’s schedule suggested that Mr. Cuomo was sending a signal to Jewish voters.

“He’s assuring the Jewish constituency that he’s with them,” said Gerald Benjamin, a professor of political science at the State University of New York at New Paltz, observing that there was a somewhat “ambiguous message coming out of the White House” about anti-Semitism. “So he’s distinguishing himself.”

Details about the trip’s itinerary were scarce, and it was not clear if Mr. Cuomo would bring along other officials or lawmakers from Albany. The speaker of the Assembly, Carl E. Heastie, the Bronx Democrat, was not planning to make the trip, nor was John J. Flanagan, the Long Island Republican who leads the State Senate.

For Mr. Cuomo, the need to spread his wings has always come second to keeping his numbers aloft at home.

During most of his first term, the governor’s reluctance to leave the state left some political observers bemused, wondering at its impact on his national profile, and the wooing of far-flung donors. As that term ended, however, his passport filled with stamps, including those of Israel and Afghanistan in 2014. In 2015, he traveled to Cuba.

Mr. Cuomo’s first trip to the Holy Land as governor was a sprint — a 29-hour trip focused on military and security issues — and he said this trip would last only a day. The governor said he would talk economics in Israel and meet with government leaders. He said he would to bring “a message of solidarity” to the Jewish people.

“We are arm to arm with them in this battle,” he said. He did not plan to meet with Palestinian leaders, he said.

Professor Benjamin said the governor, like generations of previous New York politicians, was acknowledging that New York voters — many of them the descendants of recent immigrants — appreciate when leaders go back to the old country.

“The classic New York political travel abroad is the three I’s: Israel, Italy and Ireland,” Professor Benjamin noted.

Demographics have changed. But he said, “Those still remain important, so it’s no mystery.”

Correction: March 1, 2017

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article misidentified where Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo was shown speaking to students on Wednesday. He was at an Albany theater complex, not a Jewish community center. (Mr. Cuomo had spoken at the community center earlier in the day.)

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