

“Israel: The Strategic and Global Challenges Ahead”

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Next week (November 6-8, 2011), Zahava and I are attending the Seventh Annual Schusterman Advocacy Institute High School Summit. This is a three day seminar sponsored by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee to educate pro-Israel high school students in political involvement and the importance of maintaining a strong U.S.-Israel relationship. Kids from over 131 high schools, day schools, synagogues, and youth groups meet to hear extraordinary guest speakers, discuss the essential key ideas that are being discussed regarding the Middle East, as well as learn how to speak to members of Congress about these issues. The final day, they all go to Capitol Hill, visit their local congressional offices and discuss the issues affecting the U.S.-Israel alliance.

Before going, the students are asked to familiarize themselves with the major issues that are forming the legislative and political agenda vis-à-vis Israel during this session of Congress. I thought I would give her, and you, tonight a crash course in the three critical positions that are going to be discussed with the members of Congress.

The first area which continues to be front and center is the Iranian Nuclear Threat. Iran is a leading state sponsor of terrorism and a nuclear-armed Iran would pose

a grave and unacceptable threat to global security. Since announcing in 2006 that it had begun enriching uranium, Iran's nuclear program continues to move forward. Despite U.N. Security Council resolutions and offers by the current Administration to engage in dialogue, the regime has continuously refused to hold serious talks. A nuclear-armed Iran would constitute an existential threat not only to Israel, a country it has threatened to wipe off the map, but to nations in that region. It would fundamentally alter the strategic balance in an already unstable Middle East.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (the IAEA) has uncovered evidence that Iran nuclear activities have no civilian energy purpose and have now been blocked from inspecting the facilities. Iran has been publicly advancing its research and technologies needed to deliver nuclear weapons and has increased their violent rhetoric and military testing.

The United States, led by the Obama Administration and both Chambers of Congress (unusual and unprecedented in this political climate with near-unanimous bi-partisan majorities), enacted the toughest and most comprehensive sanctions bill against Iran last year. Targeting Iran's ports and airlines, sanctions have put enormous pressure on the Iranian government and have created economic problems for that regime. Their energy sector, the engine that drives their economy, is suffering as international energy firms and financial institutions are refusing to work with Iran. However, this

round of sanctions has only slowed Iran's nuclear program but has not caused them to abandon their efforts.

The agenda this year and that is what the students are going to say to their members of Congress is that we must continue to "ratchet up" the pressure on the Iranian regime. Sanctions have had an impact on Iran but have not reached the level that would force them to abandon their pursuit of nuclear weapons.

The Iran Threat Reduction Act of 2011 (H.R. 1905) and the Iran, North Korea, and Syrian Sanctions Consolidation Act (S. 1048) would now add sanctions on the most critical components of Iran's infrastructure, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and target Iran's Central Bank. The IRGC is not only the major instrument of the regime's repression of her citizens but also controls much of its economy. Targeting the Central Bank means U.S. banks will no longer be allowed to conduct business with any financial institutions that work with Iran's national banks. These two pieces would effectively cripple Iran's entire economy.

This legislation does two things. First, these new sanctions add significantly to our diplomatic arsenal. While the Administration and Israel say that everything is on the table to stop the Iranian regime, there is still time to find a diplomatic solution; these sanctions are the kind of pressure that could force Iran to abandon its illicit nuclear activities without going down a military path. Second, this is not a hard sell in Congress. The Administration,

passionately by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, has led on this and Congress with wide support of both parties are all in full agreement that Iran must be stopped. In fact, all three of our members of our West Virginia Congressional delegation were early sponsors of HR1905 and on the Senate side, Senator Joe Manchin was an early co-sponsor.

This is front and center. We need to make sure that despite all the issues that are part of the political environment, we don't take our eyes off the ball when it comes to Iran. If the U.S. doesn't lead the world here, Iran won't be stopped and we must do everything and use every diplomatic tool to stop this regime from acquiring nuclear capability.

The second issue that students will be lobbying for is security assistance for Israel. In 2007, the United States signed what is called a "Memorandum of Understanding" with Israel that pledged 30 billion in direct U.S. Security assistances over 10 years. Non-binding, this 3 billion dollars a year commitment effectively allows Israel to continue to maintain its qualitative military edge at a critical period of her history. With the growing challenges of a Middle East in turmoil, an Iran regime threatening her existence, Hamas rocket attacks from Gaza, and a resurgent Hezbollah in Lebanon with 55,000 rockets and missiles along the Israeli border, it is critical the U.S. continues to stand by Israel and give her the ability to defend itself.

Aid for Israel is also generally not a tough sell in Congress. Israel is required to spend 74 percent of that aid in the U.S., amounting to what is a direct stimulus to our economy each year. Israel's close ties with our country means that Israel serves as our laboratory for new weaponry and technology. Israel's battlefield use of the equipment she buys becomes shared know-how. This cannot be overstated; the coordination and cooperation between the two countries militarily has never been closer. So this assistance helps our military, allows Israel to defend itself without sacrificing a single U.S. soldier, and stimulates our economy.

Not a tough sell.

*Except in a fiscally conservative environment.*

The understandable need to cut federal spending inevitably turns to Foreign Aid. That is one of the areas that Americans believe needs to be cut; polls shows that American think that as much as 25% of our federal budget is spent on foreign aid, when in reality it is just one percent and Israel is only a small fraction of that package. So the challenge is making sure that Congress remembers how important foreign assistance is in general and aid for Israel, in particular.

The final issue is that of the Palestinian effort to gain recognition of statehood at the United Nations. This is a fluid situation. The Palestinians were just granted full membership in UNESCO, the United Nation's Cultural

Body on Monday, despite objections from the U.S., Canada and Germany. This is the last part of the conversation the students will be having with our members of Congress. The Palestinian Authority going to the United Nations to pursue statehood is a direct challenge to the United States. The United States has stated, unambiguously, that the only way for the Palestinians to secure a state is through face to face negotiations with Israel. This attempt by the Palestinian Authority to use recognition in the U.N. to isolate Israel and attack her in the international courts creates impediments to the peace process. The U.S. has sent a clear message that it will use its veto power in the Security Council and is putting pressure on the PA to return to the negotiating table with Israel. The International Quartet (the U.S., Russia, Britain and the U.N.) has called for direct negotiations with no pre-conditions. Israel has accepted that call for negotiations yet the Palestinian Authority continues to refuse to meet with the Israeli government.

What Congress can do is indicate through speeches and editorials that these type of efforts to circumvent the peace prospects will not just hurt near term prospects for peace, but could damage long term U.S. Palestinian relationship. We are one of the largest contributors, if not the largest, to the Palestinian Authority and these types of provocative moves could have severed implications.

The reason I say that the situation is fluid is because other than having this conversation and making sure our members of Congress understand how important it is to

speaking up for the American position that the two sides need to return to direct talks, what Congress can actually do is unclear. The lion's share of aid to the Palestinian Authority comes from the U.S. and Europe and the aid we give to the Palestinians Authority is the "main driver" of their economic growth. Much of that aid, thanks to the transparency and good work of the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, Salam Fayyad, has created economic stability in the West Bank and unprecedented security for Israeli and for the Palestinians in the territories. These are the two necessary components for the peace: a viable Palestinian state and security for the Jewish state. It is one thing to signal that provocative moves like going to the U.N. has consequences, it is another to jeopardize the good that is being done. We need to pressure the Palestinians to return to the negotiating table, but we don't want to undo some of the positive things that are happening in the West Bank. We need to have that conversation.

Those are the key issues that are being discussed in Washington: Iran, security assistance for Israel, and the Palestinian unilateral declaration of statehood at the U.N. The American-Israel relationship remains strong but it remains strong because of the important work that is done in Congress on a regular basis. That support cannot be taken for granted. It requires knowledge of the challenges ahead and an understanding of why these issues are important. If we want a safe and secure Jewish state living one day at peace with her Arab neighbors, and if we want a two state solution that does not mean the

destruction of the only Jewish one, we must continue to educate ourselves, young and old.

May G-d protect and bless both this country and our ancestral homeland Israel.

Amen