

U.S.-Israel Security Alliance Holds Anti-BDS Mission on Capitol Hill

ISSER BERG

A delegation of Jewish business and communal leaders participated in an anti-BDS mission to Capitol Hill on Thursday, seeking to raise awareness of the dangers of the BDS movement and solidify congressional support for anti-BDS legislation.

The mission was organized by the U.S.-Israel Security Alliance, an initiative dedicated to strengthening the U.S.-Israeli relationship. BDS is an acronym for the movement to enact boycotts, divestments and sanctions against Israeli products and companies.

"The BDS movement is a deliberate attempt to place the vibrant democracy that the State of Israel represents outside the community of nations," said Mr. Ezra Friedlander, founder of the U.S.-Israel Security Alliance and CEO of The Friedlander Group, a New York City- and Washington, D.C.-based public policy consulting firm. "And it has the potential to have a debilitating effect on the economy."

The delegation of two dozen Jewish leaders met with over two dozen U.S. senators and representatives representing states or districts from Maine to California, all co-sponsors of anti-BDS legislation pending before Congress, which aims to protect the right of states and local governments to pass anti-BDS legislation, such as by refusing to do business with or refusing to have their pension funds invest with businesses that participate in BDS.

Several participants said that while the BDS movement has thus far not succeeded in negatively affecting the Israeli economy, it represents a iniquitous anti-Semitic attempt to delegitimize the Jewish state.

When asked about the effect the BDS movement has had thus far, Mr. Oded Revivi, mayor of Efrat, one of the largest Jewish cities in Yehudah and Shomron (Yesha), and chief foreign envoy of the Yesha Council, who participated in the mission, said: "I will give you two contradictory answers. One is that it has not affected us at all; we have experienced no major financial losses due to BDS. The other answer is that it affects us every day ... What BDS is really doing is not just trying to hurt us financially, but it creates an atmosphere that is putting the whole settlement entity into question.

"And in that respect, we find ourselves having to respond on a daily basis and react to those who seek to take action against us. So the BDS movement affects us on a daily basis, and it is jeopardizing [the possibility of] finding a solution for co-existence [between Jews and Arabs]."

Similarly, mission participants Mr.



Dov Lenchesky

L-R: Mission co-chairs Mr. Duvi Honig, Mr. Nathan Herzog, Mr. Andrew Friedman, Esq., Mr. Joseph B. Stamm, Sen. Ben Cardin, Sen. Ted Cruz, Mr. Ken Abramowitz, Mr. Ezra Friedlander, Dr. Alan Kadish, Mr. Stanley Treitel, NJ Assemblymember Raj Mukherji and Mr. Mark Meyer Appel.



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L-R: Mr. Bob Levi; NJ Assembly member Raj Mukherji; Mr. Robert Rosenbloom, Mr. Stanley Treitel, Mr. Chesky Blau, Mr. Duvi Honig, Dr. Alan Kadish, Mr. Ezra Friedlander, Senator Steve Daines, Mr. Jay Buchsbaum, Mr. Joseph B. Stamm, Mr. Daniel Bayar, Mr. Ken Abramowitz, Mr. Nathan Herzog, and Mr. Maurice Bortz.



Dov Lenchesky

L-R: Mission co-chairs Mr. Andrew Friedman, Esq., Mr. Joseph B. Stamm, Senator Orrin Hatch, Mr. Ken Abramowitz, and Mr. Ezra Friedlander (speaking).

Nathan Herzog and Mr. Jay Buchsbaum, executives for Royal Wine Corp. and Kedem Foods, the largest importer of food and wine from Israel, said that the BDS movement goes well beyond dollars and shekels.

"We have not seen a decline in sales of food from Israel," said Mr. Buchsbaum. But, he explained, "This is about delegitimizing. While they have failed economically, they have succeeded in demonizing the State of Israel among some groups."

Mr. Herzog compared the effect of the BDS movement to that of a "duck

who sticks its head up out of the water" every so often.

"It's rare, but we want to make sure it doesn't spread," he said.

"We didn't go to Washington only for business," said Mr. Herzog. "We went to fight anti-Semitism."

Mr. Duvi Honig, founder and CEO of the Orthodox Jewish Chamber of Commerce, a division of Parnassah Network, argued that the BDS effort is led by a self-interested movement that actually harms many Palestinians

— the very people whose interests it purports to look out for.

During meetings with a number of politicians, Mr. Honig referenced the famous SodaStream incident, in which the BDS movement forced that company's closure of a factory in Yesha, thereby causing the layoffs of hundreds of its Palestinian employees.

"The BDS movement is like the terror groups who use Palestinian schools and hospitals as armories," said Honig. "They just want to make Israel look bad and hurt Israel, and they don't even care that they are harming thousands of Palestinians."

Therefore, Mr. Honig suggested, the pro-Israeli politicians should rally support for anti-BDS legislation from groups across the political spectrum by demonstrating the damage the movement causes even Palestinians.

"Everyone should oppose this nefarious movement," he said.

Assemblyman Raj Mukherji, a New Jersey state assemblyman representing Hudson County, who authored that state's anti-BDS legislation and is a staunch supporter of Israel, participated in the mission to Washington and urged the members of Congress to introduce federal anti-BDS legislation beyond the current bills that would merely empower states and cities to pass their own laws.

Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) seemed intrigued by that idea. If federal legislation could be passed, she said, "then you don't have to fight the same battles over and over again in all 50 states."

Many of the officials who met with the delegation have visited Israel a number of times and been long-time supporters of the Jewish state.

Senator Steve Daines (R-Montana), who has toured the Syrian border and Hamas terror tunnels, encouraged the mission's participants, saying, "I believe that Israel's security is not just tied to protecting the Middle East, but I think to the entire world." Daines called Israel the "beachhead of Western civilization in the Middle East."

Another of the Senate bill's 45 co-sponsors, Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), told the delegation: "I love the country, I love what it stands for, and... I've loved the leaders from Menachem Begin on down." Mr. Hatch fondly recalled a warm personal encounter he had with Mr. Begin.

One potentially thorny issue involving anti-BDS legislation is whether it violates the First Amendment's protection of freedom of expression. In response to a question on the topic from this reporter, Raj Mukherji, the New Jersey assemblyman, argued that Congress then can use the power of the purse to set priorities.

"I think it's okay to attach strings to how taxpayer dollars are spent," he

said.

Some of the meetings during the day on the Hill involved general issues of national and international security.

About the stream of immigrants entering America from the Middle East, Mr. Hatch said: "We need to work together to make sure that these aren't terrorists who hate Jewish people and hate everyone. We have enough problems without that."

Mr. Hatch was one of a number of elected officials who are not Jewish and represent states or districts with tiny Jewish populations, yet are strong supporters of Israel as America's closest ally in the Middle East, which shares the American values of liberty and democracy.

Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas), who made support of Israel and moving the U.S. Embassy in that country to Yerushalayim one of the centerpieces of his recent presidential campaign, spoke about the importance of the United States standing with Israel against common enemies.

We are living in "perilous times," said Mr. Cruz. "Every one of us is concerned about growing threats facing Israel and the United States."

"U.S. support for Israel isn't benevolence," said Cruz. "Our interests are intertwined. It is in the United States' national-security interests to have a strong Israel fighting the same enemies we are fighting in the United States."

Mr. Cruz said BDS is "like a plague ... of anti-Israel and anti-Semitism."

"In my view, we should be using every tool we have to stand up with Israel, to stand against BDS."

Regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Mr. Cruz said, "One of the things that concerns me most [during the] next few months [is the] clear and present danger of the United Nations making a unilateral move against Israel, with the acquiescence, if not the assistance, of President Obama."

Sen. Ben Cardin (D-Maryland), one of several senators who joined the mission for a luncheon, stressed the importance of keeping up the pressure and focusing on the nefarious nature of those who seek to undermine Israel.

We must continue "making the case with clarity and truth: There is good, and there is evil," said Mr. Cardin.

Mr. Cardin also noted that the Trade Promotion Authority Act signed by President Barack Obama in June 2015 included an amendment to "discourage actions by potential trading partners that discourage commercial activity solely between the United States and Israel."

During the luncheon, as attention turned to general topics related to national security, Mr. Cardin had very harsh words for Russia's activities under strongman Mr. Vladimir Putin.

"Putin is a corrupt individual," said Cardin. "They are supporting atrocities in Syria."

In response to a question from this reporter about the threats to members of the media in Russia, Cardin agreed, noting the danger faced by journalists there, and then added that Russia is a dangerous country for people like himself, as well. "I could not travel to Russia, because I have spoken out against the Putin regime," he said.

While noting that he has supported much of President Obama's foreign policy, Mr. Cardin was critical of the president's actions — or lack thereof — in Syria.

"Russia truly believes it can do pretty much anything and there won't be a consequence," he said. "And that has to change."

"We're going to need to see a stronger U.S. presence, that Russia sees."

In regard to the question of accepting refugees from Syria, Mr. Cardin said that he is "in favor of true refugees being accepted in the United States — if they go through a vetting process. I think this country has to set an example in accepting refugees."

Returning to the subject of the anti-BDS mission, Mr. Cardin encouraged the delegation to keep fighting to protect Israel, and to keep acquiring ideological ammunition and refining its arguments. Mr. Cardin argued that Israel supporters "can do a better job explaining and presenting" their case.

"We have to get our strategy in order," he said. "We have to have legitimate answers to questions. We have to explain it better."

Rep. Scott Tipton (R-Colorado) emphasized the importance of the U.S. respecting and encouraging Israel's right to defend herself against those who seek to destroy her.

"Israel is the only ally we have that doesn't ask for American blood," said Mr. Tipton. It asks for "just the tools to be able to defend themselves."

Other members of Congress who addressed the mission included Sen. Richard Burr (R-North Carolina), chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee; Rep. Marc Veasey (D-Texas); Rep. Billy Long (R-Missouri); Rep. Tom McClintock (R-California); Rep. Bob Gibbs (R-Ohio); Rep. Debbie Wasserman-Schultz (D-Florida); Rep. Andy Barr (R-Kentucky); and Rep. Brad Sherman (D-California).

At the end of a long day in Washington, Mr. Ezra Friedlander expressed satisfaction that the mission had accomplished its goals of expressing appreciation for the elected officials who have supported anti-BDS legislation and raising awareness of the dangers of the movement.

Noting in particular how BDS seems to be strongest on college campuses, Mr. Friedlander said, "What is especially troubling to me is that this movement is led by the young generation." Groups like the U.S.-Israel Security Alliance, he said, "must work to ensure that the young generations reject the false notion of BDS."

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