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Bipartisan Bill to Combat BDS Movement Introduced in Congress

On March 2, Sens. Rob Portman (R-OH) and Ben Cardin (D-MD) introduced the U.S.-Israel Trade Enhancement Act of 2015 to combat the rising tide of international boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel.

Taking aim at government-led anti-Israel activities, the measure would leverage the ongoing free trade negotiations between the United States and the European Union in an effort to combat Europe's "commercial discrimination" of Israel, supported by the BDS movement.

"This legislation sends a clear message that if you want to be an economic partner with the United States, you cannot support politically motivated boycotts of Israel," Portman stated. "I'm pleased to introduce this bill that says the United States will not stand with those who attempt to weaken Israel.

Cardin added, "If you want to trade with the United States, you cannot participate in illegitimate sanctions or backdoor boycotts against Israel. Our government should not stand idle if our trading partners use BDS tactics to isolate one of our key allies."

In February, Reps. Peter Roskam (R-IL) and Juan Vargas (D-CA) introduced a similar bill that both counters state-sponsored boycott, divestment and sanctions against the Jewish state and looks to bolster economic ties between the U.S. and Israel.

"Today, an alarming number of countries within the European Union and beyond have embraced BDS as a form of economic warfare aimed to cripple Israel's economy and demonize its very existence," said Roskam.

"These attacks not only threaten Israel, but commercial relations across the globe. The U.S-Israel Trade and Commercial Enhancement Act will ensure that American free trade partners never engage in this harmful and illegitimate political protest against Israel, while also protecting U.S. companies from foreign lawsuits targeting their associations with Israel."

Crafting this legislation for over a year, Congressmen Vargas and Roskam are looking to push back against this troubling trend.

“BDS is a harmful political tactic which seeks to undermine and diminish Israel’s economic strength,” said Vargas.

“We need to reassure our commitment to our ally in the region by clearly defining U.S. policy to oppose this practice and dissuade other nations from adopting BDS policies toward Israel.”

Agreeing with his co-sponsor, Roskam added “I am proud to introduce this bipartisan legislation with Congressman Vargas. Although we hail from different political parties, we share a common belief that a strong and prosperous Israel is a necessity for the United States. Congress has always been the bedrock of the U.S.-Israel relationship, and we have an historic opportunity before us to once again reaffirm the mutually beneficial ties that bind our great nations.”

Election Showcases Israel's Vibrant Democracy

Last Tuesday, more than 4 million Israelis went to the polls to choose Israel’s 20th Knesset. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud party won the most votes, and will hold 30 of the Israeli parliament’s 120 seats. Over the coming weeks, Israel’s political leaders will work to assemble a new coalition government. The Obama administration has affirmed its desire to work closely with that government.

Israel’s election ensures a democratic transition of power.

- With the vote count completed, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin will consult with party leaders and select the prospective Prime Minister – the Member of Knesset (MK) he determines is best able to gain a majority of Knesset votes for his or her coalition.
- President Rivlin will almost certainly task Prime Minister Netanyahu with forming a new government because his Likud party appears to have the best chance of achieving a majority coalition.

- President Rivlin has said he will try to persuade party leaders to form a "national unity" government, including both the Likud and Zionist Union, but the choice of partners lies in the hands of the individual given the mandate to build a coalition.
- Once officially asked by Rivlin to establish a coalition, Netanyahu will have 28 days – with a possible two-week extension – to form a government. If Netanyahu cannot form a coalition following the extension, Rivlin may turn to another Knesset member.
- In his victory speech, Netanyahu stated that he seeks to form “a strong, stable government” that will provide security and social welfare to "all citizens of Israel, Jews and non-Jews alike."

The new Knesset reflects Israel’s diversity.

- The new Knesset will feature 29 female members- a record number.
- The new Knesset will have 14 Arab MKs and 2 Druze MKs – more than any previous Knesset and 23 percent more than in the outgoing Knesset. A joint list of predominantly Arab parties finished third in the elections with 13 seats. Jewish-majority parties also increased the number of Arab and Druze MKs on their lists.
- Voter turnout climbed to 72 percent – the highest since 1999.
- Israeli voters elected 40 new MKs to a first term. These include: American-born Michael Oren, Israel's former ambassador to the U.S.; Avraham Nagosa, an Ethiopian activist; Zouheir Bahloul, an Israeli-Arab sports broadcaster; Tali Ploskov, an immigrant who worked as a cleaner when she first arrived in Israel and later became the first woman from the former Soviet Union to serve as an Israeli mayor; and Manuel Trajtenberg, an Argentinean-born economist.

The U.S.-Israel relationship transcends any particular election.

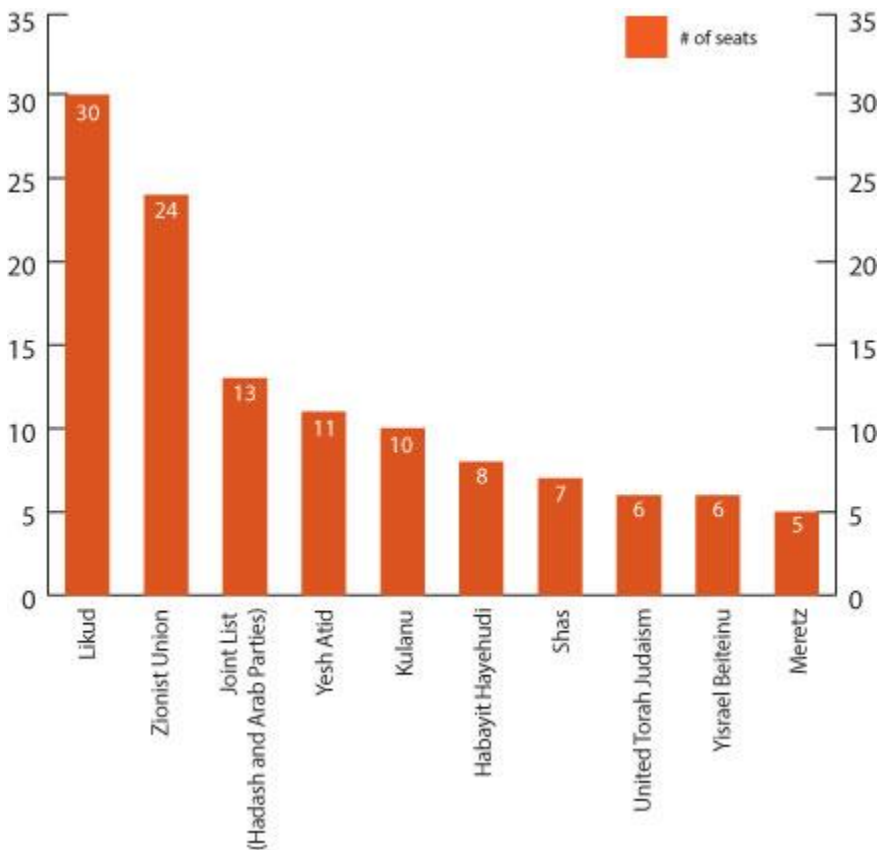
- Like America, Israel is a strong and vibrant democracy governed by laws protecting free speech, religious freedom and minority rights.
- The U.S.-Israel relationship transcends the politics of the moment, and is based on shared values, strategic interests and a long-standing friendship.

- American leaders reaffirmed their commitment to the U.S.-Israeli alliance following Israel’s elections. White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest said that President Obama remains “committed to working very closely with the winner of the ongoing elections to cement and further deepen the strong relationship between the United States and Israel, and the president is confident that he can do that with whomever the Israeli people choose.” The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has consistently failed to prevent the U.N.-prohibited Hezbollah activity in southern Lebanon. With the support of Iran and Syria, Hezbollah has amassed an arsenal of more than 100,000 short and long-range missiles and rockets, threatening all major Israeli population centers

According to recent reports, Iran has supplied new advanced “Fateh” missiles to its terror proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah. The “Fateh” missiles have a range of 150-200 miles and are capable of carrying a 1,000-pound warhead, according to Fars, Iran’s semi-official news agency.

In response to recent attacks and looming threats on its border, Israel has been forced to step up its own military deployment and prepare for the possibility of future hostilities.

Composition of New Knesset



AIPAC CEO Howard Kohr Testifies to House

Subcommittee

On March 25, AIPAC CEO Howard Kohr testified before the House Appropriations State and Foreign Operations subcommittee regarding U.S. security assistance to Israel for fiscal year 2016.

In his remarks, Kohr highlighted the regional turmoil, the U.S.-Israel strategic partnership, and the benefits of U.S. assistance to Israel's defense and to our country's national security.

"As the Middle East faces its most dramatic upheavals in decades, U.S. security assistance to Israel plays a key role in advancing American strategic interests in the region and ensuring the Jewish state's ability to defend itself," said Kohr.

Fiscal year 2016 marks the eighth of a 10-year agreement between the U.S. and Israel to provide an average annual military assistance of \$3.1 billion in order to maintain Israel's qualitative military edge over its adversaries and combat the region's growing threats.

"In this context, AIPAC strongly urges the Subcommittee to approve the president's request of \$3.1 billion in security assistance for Israel in fiscal year 2016 in accordance with the 2007 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed between the United States and Israel," said Kohr. "The approval of this assistance should include the legislatively-mandated terms under which it has historically been provided, particularly provisions mandating the level of assistance, offshore procurement and early disbursement. In addition, we support a robust and bipartisan foreign aid program that ensures America's strong leadership position in the world."

Congressman Praises Israel's Neuroscience Innovations at Tel Aviv Conference

Top congressional science appropriator Rep. Chaka Fattah (D-PA) hailed Israel as a neuroscience world leader at the BrainTech 2015 conference in Tel Aviv.

“The U.S. and Europe may have more breakthroughs in neuroscience, but you have to put that in perspective,” said Fattah. “The U.S. has 350 million people, and there are 28 countries in the European Union. Israel is third behind these countries in its neuroscience developments, but per capita it is way ahead of everyone.”

As the only U.S. elected official invited to speak at the March conference, Fattah joined international neuroscientists, entrepreneurs, government leaders and other stakeholders to emphasize increased global neuroscience collaboration to analyze and mend the human brain.

“The most important factor in neuroscience progress is going to be international cooperation,” he said. “The U.S., Europe, Japan, China, and many others are contributing to this. That, President Peres told me, is part of his vision as well. But there’s no denying the great contributions Israel has made in neuroscience, which is why I am here – and plan to keep coming back until some of these big questions and problems are solved.”

Known for leading congressional initiatives to grow neuroscience research, Fattah serves as the senior Democrat on the House appropriations subcommittee on commerce, justice and science.

Using his Israel trip to foster more partnerships in the neuroscience field for the U.S., Fattah met individually with Former Israeli Prime Minister and President Shimon Peres, U.S. Ambassador to Israel Daniel Shapiro and Director-General of Israel’s Ministry of Science, Technology and Space Ido Sharir.

“I’m convinced that the pulse of this international consensus starts here. A gathering together in a quilt, not in a single unbroken piece of cloth, but in segments, we are here to seize the neuroscience moment,” Fattah said. “We are here, and we will always be here, because this is the work that will

change the world.”

Reiterating his endeavors to expand the United States' commitment to brain research and neurotechnology, Fattah has worked with Israel to develop neuroscience technology.

“I’ve seen with my own eyes what the effects of Israeli neuroscience research are,” said Fattah. “It was in my congressional district in Philadelphia that ReWalk, the Israeli company that makes the exoskeleton suit that enables paraplegics to walk, carried out their trials. I saw an IDF veteran who was in a wheelchair for 20 years get up and walk. That was an amazing thing to see.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Addresses Joint Meeting of Congress

On March 3, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressed a joint meeting of Congress. His speech was dedicated to the threat of Iran, in particular its nuclear weapons program. An overwhelming number of Congressional Democrats and Republicans were in attendance.

Prior to addressing Congress, Netanyahu spoke at the AIPAC Policy Conference, addressing more than 16,000 pro-Israel activists from across the country.

With the March deadline for a political framework agreement on Iran’s nuclear program quickly approaching, Netanyahu discussed key points on nuclear negotiations and called on the United States and its negotiating partners not to strike a bad deal with Iran.

He warned that a bad deal would allow Tehran to maintain its nuclear infrastructure and would provide less than a year’s warning to an Iranian breakout to a nuclear weapon. Highlighting Iran’s longtime defiance of international inspectors in a game of “hide and cheat,” he stressed that any good agreement must dismantle any conceivably military element of Iran’s nuclear program.

Netanyahu expressed grave concern about the “sunset clause,” which reportedly would free Iran of any special constraints on its nuclear activities after a period of 10 or 15 years. His speech also emphasized Iran’s domineering—and destructive—role in the region and its constant threats to annihilate Israel.

Several key members of Congress echoed the Prime Minister's views.

Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) agreed with the Prime Minister's assessment of Iran. "I have been fortunate to meet with Prime Minister Netanyahu many times, including today. I agree with Prime Minister Netanyahu that Iran is bent on the annihilation of Israel. We need only to look to the words of the Iranian leaders themselves for proof that Prime Minister Netanyahu's characterization is accurate," said Reid.

House Democrat Whip Steny Hoyer (D-MD) joined Netanyahu's apprehension on Iran.

"I share his [Netanyahu's] concern that Iran has shown it cannot be trusted," said Hoyer. "I remain hopeful – though skeptical – that an agreement can be reached, which is clearly the best option. If there is an agreement, at a minimum it must dismantle Iran's nuclear weapons-related infrastructure, include what Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken called 'the strongest, most intrusive inspection and access program that any country has ever seen,' and deal with militarization. America's policy toward Iran has consistently been and must continue to be prevention, not containment."

After the address, Netanyahu met with the bipartisan Senate leadership to discuss what should be done next. He was invited by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) and Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) and thanked the members of the group for their continued bipartisan support for the Jewish state.

"Members of both parties extend a warm welcome to him," said McConnell. "The prime minister's address coincides with an increasingly aggressive Iranian campaign to expand its sphere of influence across the Middle East."

Washington Brief: A Recap of News from the Hill and Beyond

367 House Members Raise Concerns on Iran

On March 23, a bipartisan group of 367 House lawmakers sent a letter to President Barack Obama highlighting crucial conditions for a nuclear agreement with Iran.

Spearheaded by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce (R-CA) and Ranking Democrat Eliot Engel (D-NY), the letter stresses that “a final comprehensive nuclear agreement must constrain Iran’s nuclear infrastructure so that Iran has no pathway to a bomb, and that agreement must be long-lasting.”

Emphasizing Congress’ role in enacting a deal with Iran, the letter states, “should an agreement with Iran be reached, permanent sanctions relief from congressionally-mandated sanctions would require new legislation. In reviewing such an agreement, Congress must be convinced that its terms foreclose any pathway to a bomb, and only then will Congress be able to consider permanent sanctions relief.”

The bipartisan letter also comments on Iran’s past dealings with international inspectors on its nuclear program. Discussing that Tehran has failed to reveal its past bomb work, the representatives warn that unless there is a full comprehension of Iran’s prior nuclear-related military activity, “it will be impossible for the international community to judge Iran’s future breakout time with certainty.”

Due to Iran’s deceptive behavior, the representatives note that “Iran’s record of clandestine activity and intransigence prevents any trust in Iran” and that verifiable restrictions on Iran’s nuclear program must span for decades.

House Committee Holds Hearing on Iran Nuclear Negotiations

On March 19, the House Foreign Affairs Committee held a hearing about the state of nuclear negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran.

Deputy Secretary of State at the State Department Tony Blinken and Acting Undersecretary in the Treasury Department's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Adam Szubin testified at the hearing on the current condition of the nuclear talks.

During his opening remarks, Chairman Ed Royce (R-CA) emphasized the necessity of congressional oversight. "This Committee is prepared to evaluate any agreement to determine if it is in the long-term national security interests of the United States and our allies," said Royce. "Indeed, as Secretary Kerry testified not long ago, any agreement will have to 'pass muster with Congress.' Yet that commitment has been muddied by the Administration's insistence in recent weeks that Congress not

play a role. That's not right. Congress built the sanctions structure that brought Iran to the table. And if the President moves to dismantle it, we will have a say."

Ranking Member Eliot Engel (D-NY) strongly echoed Royce's comments. "Make no mistake: Congress will play an important role in the evaluation of a final deal," said Engel. "Again, I want to say that I will not stand by and allow Congress to be marginalized. Any permanent repeal of sanctions is, by law, Congress's discretion. And before we do that, we must be completely convinced that this deal blocks all of Iran's pathways to a nuclear bomb."

Defense Secretary and Top General Commend U.S.-Israel Defense Cooperation and Caution on Iran

Defense Secretary Ash Carter and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey praised U.S. -Israel defense cooperation and warned against Iran's ballistic missile capabilities during a series of House and Senate hearings on the fiscal year 2016 budget.

"This is a longstanding concern, the ever-growing, expanding in numbers and range Iranian ballistic missile program," said Carter, during the House Appropriations subcommittee on defense budget hearing. "It is the reason for our very close cooperation with Israel in missile defense, as we cooperate with Israel in everything in defense. This is a very important ally to us, our most important ally in the region."

Echoing Carter's statement, Dempsey added "The ballistic missile capability of Iran is one of about five things that cause me great concern from a national security perspective."

Rep. Steve Israel (D-NY) posed questions regarding cooperative missile defense programs including Arrow 3, Arrow 2, Iron Dome and others.

"I've been doing this a long time, and we have a relationship that close with the Israeli defense forces, and that needs to continue. And missile defense has to -- and will continue, and missile defense an important part of it," said Carter. "You mentioned Iron Dome, you mentioned Arrow, I could mention Patriot and lots of other things that we do together, and we share capability there. It's a longstanding joint effort and it'll continue."

While testifying on the president's proposed budget, both Carter and Dempsey discussed the overall dangers of Iran.

"I certainly think that the danger of a runaway Iranian program stimulating runaway nuclear programs elsewhere in the Middle East is a very serious one," said Carter to the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Lawmakers Request \$2 Million for U.S.-Israel Energy Cooperation

106 House members sent a letter to the leaders of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development requesting \$2 million for the U.S.-Israel Energy Cooperation Program as part of the FY2016 Energy and Water Appropriations bill.

Led by Rep. Brad Sherman (D-CA), along with Reps. Peter Roskam (R-IL), Eliot Engel (D-NY), Bill Johnson (R-OH), Ted Deutch (D-FL), and Peter King (R-NY), this year's letter shows substantial growth in support of this request.

First authorized in 2007, the United States has contributed \$11.7 million to the program to-date, matched dollar-for-dollar by Israel.

Additionally, the letter states that over \$27 million has been leveraged in private sector cost-sharing thanks to the energy initiative.

The U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Act, passed by Congress and signed into law by the president last year, expanded the program to cover joint R&D into renewables, natural gas and water technologies.

"Continued funding for the program will provide for collaborative U.S. and Israeli research and development efforts in areas critical to both the United States and Israel and unite our countries in the pursuit of increased energy security, energy independence and water efficiency," the letter states.

A companion letter is now circulating in the Senate, led by Sens. Susan Collins (R-ME) and Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY).