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Myths and Facts About the Combating BDS Act

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I.L. Kenen, Founder, 1905–1988

Summary

MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT THE COMBATING BDS ACT

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In recent weeks, there has been much misinformation about the Combating BDS Act, an important bipartisan bill which would simply clarify that U.S. states have the authority to act against commerce- or investment-related boycotts targeting Israel without fear that they are preempting federal authority.

Main Points:

- Nothing in this bill restricts constitutionally protected free speech.
- The bill in no way impedes the right of any American to boycott or criticize Israel.
- Congress should take up and pass the Combating BDS Act as quickly as possible.

SEVENTY YEARS OF FREE ISRAELI ELECTIONS: DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY

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On April 9, Israelis will go to the polls to vote for the 21st Knesset—Israel's parliament—70 years this month after the first Knesset election was held. During these seven decades of wars, terrorism and the absorption of millions of immigrants from around the world, Israelis voted 20 times for their political leadership in peaceful, democratic elections.

Main Points:

- Remarkably, only 22 other nations among the world's 193 have similarly conducted uninterrupted free elections since 1949—none in the face of such daunting challenges.
- This extraordinary democratic resilience makes Israel a uniquely reliable U.S. ally in the unstable Middle East, where no other democracy exists.
- Israel stands as a beacon of hope, and it is the United States' interest that Israel remains safe and secure.

IN MEMORIAM: AIPAC TRAILBLAZER LARRY WEINBERG

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On Jan. 1, former AIPAC President Larry Weinberg (z"l) passed away in Los Angeles at the age of 92. In his extraordinary life, Larry served his country, strengthened the U.S.-Israel relationship and helped shape AIPAC in its formative years.

Main Points:

- "Larry and [his wife] Barbi Weinberg were the father and mother of modern AIPAC," said AIPAC CEO Howard Kohr. "Larry exemplified what it means to be both a proud Zionist and a proud American."
- In addition to his own involvement, Larry also helped mentor many of AIPAC's current leaders.
- May his memory be a blessing.

A RECAP OF NEWS FROM THE HILL AND BEYOND

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There were two important milestones in U.S.-Israel missile defense cooperation this month. On Jan. 22, the Israel Missile Defense Organization and the U.S. Missile Defense Agency carried out a successful test of the Arrow-3 missile defense system in central Israel. And on Jan. 9, the U.S. Army announced it will acquire two Iron Dome batteries.

Members of Congress from both parties have spoken out with concern over the announced U.S. troop withdrawal from Syria.

In January, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton and Commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Gen. Joseph Votel visited the Middle East, continuing the diplomatic efforts to advance U.S. interests in the region.

On Jan. 15, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo condemned Iran's failed attempt to launch a space vehicle, which involves technology that could be used in intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching America...

FEATURED EDITORIAL

Myths and Facts About the Combating BDS Act

In recent weeks, there has been much misinformation about the Combating BDS Act (CBA), an important bipartisan bill which would simply clarify that U.S. states have the authority to act against commerce- or investment-related boycotts targeting Israel without fear that they are preempting federal authority.

These mischaracterizations take advantage of the hyper-charged partisan environment to promulgate baseless slogans and pure disinformation while rarely addressing the specifics of the bill.

To help clear things up, four common myths on the issue are debunked below:

MYTH #1: THE COMBATING BDS ACT RESTRICTS FREE SPEECH.

FACT: Nothing in this bill restricts constitutionally protected free speech.

The text of the bill, in Sec. 405, specifically notes that “Nothing in this title shall be construed to infringe upon any right protected under the First Amendment to the Constitution of the

United States.”

The legislation only covers corporations’ commerce- or investment-related activities in the course of interstate or international commerce. The bill would not impact companies that simply express their opposition to Israel or Israeli policies.

It is well-established that Congress may impose regulations barring compliance with foreign boycotts that conflict with U.S. legislative or foreign policy interests, without running afoul of the First Amendment.

Likewise, Congress may also restrict the information Americans can provide to foreign governments with respect to foreign boycotts. See: *Trane Co. v. Baldrige*, 552 F. Supp. 1378 (W.D. Wis. 1983) and *Briggs and Stratton Corp. v. Baldrige*, 728 F.2d 915 (7th Cir. 1984).

This bill does not and cannot abridge Americans’ right to free speech or their right to sue states for perceived violations of First Amendment rights.

The Combating BDS Act is an important bipartisan bill which would simply clarify that U.S. states have the authority to act against commerce- or investment-related boycotts targeting Israel without fear that they are preempting federal authority.

MYTH #2: THE BILL WILL NEGATIVELY IMPACT INDIVIDUALS’ RIGHT TO BOYCOTT OR CRITICIZE ISRAEL.

FACT: The bill in no way impedes the right of any American to boycott or criticize Israel. The law does not even apply to individuals. The law only recognizes that state and local governments may adopt certain policies related to corporations, companies, business associations, partnerships or trusts without the concern that

federal law in any way preempts the state and local governments' ability to do so. Corporations are free to express their opposition to Israeli policies, as mentioned above.

Individuals who choose to personally boycott Israel or express support for boycott efforts would clearly not be subject to the law.

The Combating BDS Act does not limit the rights of individuals—including those acting as government contractors—to personally engage in boycotts of Israel. Such contractors can refuse to buy Israeli goods or do business with Israel in their private capacity, so long as they do not discriminate against or limit commercial relations with Israel or persons doing business in Israel while in their professional capacity.

MYTH #3: THE COMBATING BDS ACT WOULD "ENCOURAGE" STATES TO PASS ANTI-BDS LAWS.

FACT: This is an utter mischaracterization of what the bill does. The CBA simply clarifies that states have the right to pass such laws, if they so choose, without preempting federal authority. In fact, for years, without the CBA in effect, more than two-dozen states have already passed such laws.

Specifically, the bill notes in Sec. 402(a) [emphasis added] that "Notwithstanding any other provision of law, a State or local government *may* adopt and enforce [these] measures". The use of the word "may"—as opposed to "must," "should," etc.—makes clear that those who claim the bill "encourages" states to pass anti-BDS laws are either misleading or

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misinformed.

MYTH #4: STATES HAVE NO AUTHORITY TO COMBAT BOYCOTTS OF THE JEWISH STATE.

FACT: The United States Supreme Court has held that a state government may exercise its discretion in selectively funding programs, without running afoul of the Constitution. The converse is

also true—a state government may choose not to fund or subsidize activities of companies whose actions are at variance with state law or policy. Likewise, U.S. courts have long held that the government, as an employer, exercises wide discretion and control over those who contract with it and may limit the activities of those contractors in the interest of achieving the government's goals.

The CBA is not the first instance in which the federal government has acknowledged a state's inherent powers to divest from companies acting contrary to legislative policy. In fact, the CBA mirrors a provision within current federal law—the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010 (CISADA)—which clarifies that state governments may divest from companies invested in Iran's energy sector.

CONCLUSION

Congress should take up and pass the Combating BDS Act as quickly as possible. This important bipartisan bill seeks both to protect states against claims they are preempting federal authority and to demonstrate Congress' strong support for state measures consistent with Congress' historic commitment to oppose

boycotts of Israel.

The Combating BDS Act has attracted widespread bipartisan support and was cosponsored in the previous Congress by the current Senate leaders of both parties, as well as the current Chairman and Ranking Members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Senate Finance Committee, along with many other members from both parties and in both chambers.  AIPAC

Congress should take up and pass the Combating BDS Act as quickly as possible.

Seventy Years of Free Israeli Elections: Democratic Resilience in the Face of Adversity

On April 9, Israelis will go to the polls to vote for the 21st Knesset—Israel’s parliament—70 years this month after the first Knesset election was held. During these seven decades of wars, terrorism and the absorption of millions of immigrants from around the world, Israelis voted 20 times for their political leadership in peaceful, democratic elections.

Remarkably, only 22 other nations among the world’s 193 have similarly conducted uninterrupted free elections since 1949—none in the face of such daunting challenges. This extraordinary democratic resilience makes Israel a uniquely reliable U.S. ally in the unstable Middle East, where no other democracy exists. Israel stands as a beacon of hope, and it is the United States’ interest that Israel remains safe and secure.

ISRAEL'S FIRST LEGISLATIVE ELECTION

On Jan. 25, 1949, 440,000 Israelis—a remarkable 87 percent turnout—went to the polls to vote for Israel's first legislative body, then called the Constituent Assembly; the Assembly changed its name to Knesset three weeks later.

This first Israeli election was perhaps unique in history. Not only was it held a mere eight months after Israel's Declaration of Independence, but at the time of the election, Israel's War of Independence had not yet ended; all four war-ending armistice agreements with Israel's neighbors had yet to be signed. By comparison, the first U.S. legislative election was held 12 years after the Declaration of Independence and more than five years after the end of the War of Independence. Israel's deep commitment to free elections has not wavered in the seven decades that have passed since its first election.



PHOTO: ISRAELI GOVERNMENT PRESS OFFICE

David Ben-Gurion, who would become Israel's first prime minister, casting his vote for the Israeli Constituent Assembly on Jan. 25, 1949.

Although the 1949 election was Israel's first, it already had deep roots going back nearly

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three decades. As early as 1920—shortly after the establishment of the British Mandate for Palestine—the local Jewish community elected an Assembly of Representatives, which functioned as an autonomous parliament. Three more elections to the Assembly followed during the Mandate—in 1925, 1935 and 1944. The last Assembly of Representatives functioned until February 1949, one day before the first Knesset was sworn in.

For its first official legislative election in 1949, Israel adopted the electoral system first implemented in 1920: a nation-wide proportional representation for a unicameral parliament. The number of seats that each party list received in the 120-member Knesset was proportional to the number of votes it had obtained. The government, headed by a prime minister, was elected by the Knesset with a simple majority; the Knesset could remove the government from office in a vote of non-confidence.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Continuity:

Except for a brief period (1996-2001) when Israel experimented with direct elections for the prime minister, its electoral system has remained virtually unchanged.

An important element of continuity has been the representation in the Knesset of almost every shade of opinion in the country's population. Four blocs of voters have been represented on the religious-secular continuum:

ultra-Orthodox, religious, traditional and secular. In terms of national identity, both Jews and Arabs have always been represented in the Knesset. The same goes for representation of the right and left wings, and everywhere in between, on social and security issues.

And just as in 1949, no party since has succeeded in securing a majority of seats in the Knesset. Every prime minister needed to form a coalition government with other parties, a prescription for political volatility. Thus, although Knesset elections are scheduled to be held every four years, recurrent early elections resulting from the collapse of Knesset coalitions have yielded 20 Knesset elections in 66 years—from the first election in 1949 through the latest election of 2015—instead of 16. Moreover, prime ministers have frequently been forced to form one or more new coalition governments during the term of a single Knesset due to a coalition partner's withdrawal from the government.

Change:

Israel has passed the most crucial test of any genuine democracy—a peaceful transition in the country's elected leadership. From 1949 until 1977, the Knesset was dominated by coalitions of Socialist and religious parties headed by Mapai—the predecessor of today's Labor Party. The right-wing Likud—the same party leading today's coalition government—won the largest number of Knesset seats in 1977 and formed the government. The idea that Mapai would refuse to peacefully yield power to Likud, its bitter political rival for decades, did not even arise.

Israel stands as a beacon of hope, and it is the United States' interest that Israel remains safe and secure.

Since then, the government has changed hands several times, and in a few cases, the two main parties formed national unity governments.

A seemingly technical change—raising the qualifying threshold for a party to enter into the Knesset—changed Israel's historical trajectory. Originally the threshold was only 1 percent of the vote. It was raised to 1.5 percent ahead of the 1992 election. Consequently, the right-wing party Tehiya (Renaissance), which won 1.3 percent that year, failed to enter the Knesset as it would have if the 1 percent threshold had been kept. Consequently,

instead of a right-wing government headed by Likud, a left-of-center government headed by Labor was formed. Led by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, that government signed the Oslo Accords, which had profound, long-lasting effects on Israel's domestic and international situation.

The electoral threshold was raised again, to 2 percent, in 2003. The current threshold of 3.25 percent was enacted in 2014. Consequently, the number of parties elected to the Knesset dropped from a record 15 (1955, 1984, 1988 and 1992) to 10 following the latest Knesset election of 2015.

WHO'S RUNNING?

As in previous elections, in addition to the parties represented in the current Knesset and some of those that had run in the past but failed to pass the qualifying threshold, new parties have been formed ahead of the April election. All parties must submit their lists of candidates

by Feb. 21, so more parties may still register, but here is the current breakdown:

Parties in the Coalition:

Today, the 61-member governing coalition is headed by the right-wing **Likud**, the party that won the largest number of seats (30) in the 2015 election. It is led by Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been prime minister since 2009 and had also headed the government from 1996 to 1999.

The second-largest party (10 seats) in the coalition is the center-right **Kulanu** (All of Us), headed by Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, who split from Likud in 2013. It mainly focuses on socio-economic issues, seeking to improve the economic conditions of working-class and middle-class Israelis.

Kulanu is followed by **The Jewish Home** (eight seats), a national-religious party headed, at the time of the 2015 election, by Minister of Education Naftali Bennett. It is seeking to annex at least part of the West Bank and bolster the nation's observance of Jewish laws. On Dec. 29, Bennett and Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked announced they were quitting The Jewish Home and forming a new party (more below).

Next is **Shas** (seven seats), an ultra-Orthodox party representing mainly Sephardi Jews (originating from the Middle East or North Africa). It is headed by Interior Minister Aryeh Deri and seeks to promote both observance of Jewish laws and the socio-economic interests of its less-affluent Sephardi constituency.

Finally, **United Torah Judaism** (six seats) is an ultra-Orthodox party representing Ashkenazi Jews (originating from Western, mostly European countries). Headed by Deputy Health Minister Yaakov Litzman and Knesset

Finance Committee Chairman Moshe Gafni, it focuses on the strict observance of Jewish laws, exemption of yeshiva (religious seminary) students from military service and large subsidies for yeshivas and multiple-children families.

Parties in the Opposition:

The largest Knesset list in the 59-member opposition elected in 2015 was **The Zionist Union** (24 seats), an alliance of the **Labor Party**, headed by Avi Gabbay, with the much-smaller **Hatnuah** (The Movement), led by Tzipi Livni. Since Gabbay is not a Knesset member, Livni was declared "Leader of the Opposition." The Zionist Union was a center-left alliance calling for a two-state solution (i.e., the creation of a Palestinian state that would live side-by-side with the Jewish state of Israel). On Jan. 1, Gabbay announced the dissolution of the Zionist Union. The Labor Party remains under his leadership, with Labor Knesset Member Shelly Yachimovich declared Leader of the Opposition. Hatnuah is once again a separate party under Livni's leadership.

The second-largest party in the opposition is **The Joint List** (13 seats), an alliance of four Arab-dominated parties. Headed by Ayman Odeh, it reflects the broad ideological spectrum of its constituent parties—from Communism to Socialism to Islamism, and from support for a two-state solution to anti-Zionism. On Jan. 9, the leader of the anti-Zionist **Ta'al** (Hebrew acronym for Arab Movement for Renewal) announced his party was leaving The Joint List and would run separately in the April election.

Next comes the centrist **Yesh Atid** (There Is a Future) with 11 seats, headed by Yair Lapid. It supports a two-state solution, economic liberalism and secularism.

Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Is Our Home), a right-wing party headed by Avigdor Liberman, won six seats in the 2015 election but lost one seat when Orly Levy-Abekasis left the party in 2017 to form her own Knesset list. The party, which has traditionally relied on the votes of Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union, is a nationalist-secularist party calling for the transfer of Arab-inhabited parts of Israel to a future Palestinian state in return for keeping the Jewish settlement blocs in the West Bank in order to maintain a large Jewish majority in Israel following the conclusion of a peace treaty. Last November, Yisrael Beiteinu quit the coalition government.

Meretz (Vigor), with five seats, is a left-wing party headed by Tamar Zandberg. It calls for immediate steps leading to the creation of a Palestinian state and for turning Israel from a market economy to a welfare state.

Finally, **Gesher** (Bridge)—a one-seat independent list—is headed by Orly Levy-Abekasis, who left Yisrael Beiteinu in 2017 because, she said, the party did not pay enough attention to social issues.

Existing Parties That Had Failed to Enter the Knesset in Previous Elections:

Founded in 1999 and headed by Boaz Wachtel and others, **Ale Yarok** (Green Leaf) announced it would run in the April election. Its primary goal is to legalize cannabis.

Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power)—a far-right party founded in 2012 by supporters of Meir Kahane, is led by Michael Ben-Ari and Aryeh Eldad.

On Dec. 30, Eldad Yaniv announced he would resurrect the party Eretz Hadasha (New

Country), which he founded in 2012, under the name **The Protest Movement**. A prominent leader of activists demonstrating against what they say is corruption in government, Yaniv said the party's purpose is to replace "the old, corrupt leadership."

Yachad (Together) is an ultra-Orthodox, right-wing Sephardi party founded by former Shas leader Eli Yishai in 2014.

Zehut (Identity) is a right-wing party founded by Moshe Feiglin in 2015.

Social Justice, headed by Yom Kippur War veteran Motti Ashkenazi and social activist Gad Haran, was founded in 2007 and failed to cross the qualifying threshold in the 2013 election. It calls for reducing the socio-economic gaps in Israeli society.

Numerous additional parties that had run in previous elections but received only a few hundred votes have registered to run in the April election.

New Parties:

As early as last July, Adina Bar-Shalom—daughter of the late Haredi Rabbi Ovadia Yosef—registered a new party called **Ahi Yisraeli** (My Israeli Brother). She announced her party would appeal not only to the ultra-Orthodox but also to other religious and secular Israelis. The party's declared goals include "reducing wealth inequality, promoting societal coexistence and respect, advancing equality for women, and renewing a drive for a peace accord with the Palestinians." Bar-Shalom announced in December that she would run in the April election.

Next came Salman Abu Ahmad, who

announced in mid-December that he would form a new centrist Arab party named **New Horizon**; he registered the party on Dec. 31. The party's registration documents say its goals include "improving the status of Israel's Arab citizens..., upgrading the education system..., uproot[ing] crime and violence in Arab society..., promot[ing] the status of women in Arab society and serving as a bridge to a historical reconciliation between the [Israeli and Palestinian] peoples and peace with Arab states."

On Dec. 25—one day after the government decided to hold a snap election on April 9—former IDF Chief of Staff and Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon announced he is forming a new party and will run in the coming elections. Ya'alon had previously cited Israel's economic and social woes as issues he would seek to address in a leadership position. On Jan. 2, Ya'alon registered his new party under the name **Telem** (the Hebrew acronym for Stately National Movement).

On Dec. 27, another former IDF Chief of Staff, Benny Gantz, registered his new party—**Israel Resilience**—announcing he would run in the upcoming election. The party seeks the "continued development and strengthening of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state according to the Zionist vision as expressed in the Declaration of Independence, while establishing and changing national priorities in the fields of education, development of national infrastructure, agriculture, rule of law and

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internal security, peace and security," according to its registration form.

On Dec. 29, Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked announced they were quitting the Jewish Home to form a new party that would appeal both to religious and to secular Jews, called **The New Right**. They said the party would promote the integrity of the Land of Israel and oppose the creation of a Palestinian state west of the Jordan. Jewish Home Knesset Member Shuli Moalem-Refaeli announced she would join the new party.

On Jan. 7, Maj. Gen. (res.) Dr. Yom-Tov Samia registered a new party, **B'Yahad** (Together; Hebrew acronym for Security, Jewish-Israeli, Social-

Educational, Democratic). Its declared goals are freedom, the rule of law, a solid Jewish majority, security and peace within secure borders.

On Jan. 8, Brig. Gen. (ret.) Gal Hirsch registered a new party, **Magen Yisrael** (Shield of Israel), which will run in the April 9 election. Previously, Hirsch described the settlements as a "defensive wall" and expressed opposition to withdrawals.

On Jan. 15, former Israeli special forces warrior Amos Danieli and Israeli Arab social worker Walid Diab announced the formation of a new Jewish-Arab party, **L'Ma'anenu** (For Us), to promote the socio-economic interests of the Israeli-Arab community, which, they said, had been neglected by The Joint List.

It is likely that additional new parties will register ahead of the Feb. 21 deadline.

A STABLE DEMOCRACY MAKES A RELIABLE ALLY

Although Israel's myriad parties and byzantine politics have often produced political volatility, Israeli democracy has remained rock-solid for 70 years and is on par with the most advanced Western democracies. Of course, like any other country, Israel has its flaws. But in addition to free elections, Israel has maintained the rule of law, freedom of expression, assembly and religion, equal civil and human rights for all its citizens, and a free-market economy.

From the perspective of U.S. regional interests, Israel's democratic stability is priceless. Over the decades, the United States has worked with multiple other Middle Eastern allies, none of them democratic. In the long run, non-democratic allies can become enemies virtually overnight. To cite two examples: As a monarchy, Libya was an important U.S. ally with a huge U.S. Air Force base on its territory; when Col. Muammar Qaddafi took over in a 1969 coup, he turned Libya into a bitter enemy of the United States. And Iran, under the Shah, was considered America's top regional ally. As soon as radical Islamists under Ayatollah

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U.S. security assistance and diplomatic support for Israel are based on the twin pillars of common strategic interests and shared values—particularly, a firm commitment to stable democratic governance.

Khomeini took over in 1979, Iran became—and still is—America's most dangerous and hostile adversary in the region. Americans need not worry about such upheavals in Israel.

Israel's military and economic might, its legendary inventiveness that earned it the nickname "the Startup Nation," its vibrant democracy and

its people's deep affection for America make the Jewish state a uniquely valuable U.S. ally in the Middle East and beyond. Among other contributions, Israel has provided the United States with vital intelligence on America's and Israel's common enemies, and Israeli innovations have saved countless American lives on the battlefield, at home and beyond.

THE U.S. MUST CONTINUE TO HELP ENSURE ISRAEL'S SECURITY

For its part, the United States has greatly bolstered Israeli security. For five decades, American weaponry has been the mainstay of Israel's military power. After Egypt and Syria attacked Israel on Yom Kippur of 1973, a massive U.S. airlift to Israel helped turn the tide and enabled Israel to win the war. When

Iraq launched dozens of Scud missiles into Israel in 1991, the United States rushed Patriot anti-missile batteries to Israel. Since the 1990s, more than \$1 billion in American materiel has been prepositioned in Israel to be made available both

to the U.S. armed forces and, if needed, to the Israeli military. In 2016, the U.S. administration committed to grant Israel \$38 billion over 10 years in military assistance—an unprecedented aid level. And U.S. diplomatic support has prevented the adoption of countless biased, anti-Israel U.N. Security Council resolutions.

U.S. security assistance and diplomatic support for Israel are based on the twin pillars of common strategic interests and shared values—particularly, a firm commitment to stable democratic governance. Israel is currently facing increasingly grave security threats from the same enemies that menace American security, mainly Iran and its surrogates and other Islamist terrorist organizations. For the sake of both democratic allies, it is incumbent on the United States to continue to help ensure Israel's security. 

In Memoriam: AIPAC Trailblazer Larry Weinberg

On Jan. 1, former AIPAC President Larry Weinberg passed away in Los Angeles at the age of 92. In his extraordinary life, Larry served his country, strengthened the U.S.-Israel relationship and helped shape AIPAC in its formative years.

“AIPAC is saddened by the passing of former AIPAC President Larry Weinberg (z”l) who was a deeply respected leader in the pro-Israel community,” AIPAC said in a press release.

“Larry and his wife, Barbi, were critical in forging the movement to strengthen the relationship between the U.S. and the Jewish state. Their dedicated efforts over many years educated scores of political and community leaders about the importance of our bipartisan alliance with our democratic ally.”

U.S. Sens. Robert Menendez and Ron Wyden also mourned the loss of their friend Larry.

Sen. Menendez said, “I am deeply saddened to hear of the passing of former AIPAC President Larry Weinberg. Larry’s dedication to building and maintaining the strong bonds between the United States and Israel through education and engagement was inspiring and has undoubtedly left a lasting impact for generations to come. As a veteran of World War II, Larry deeply understood the importance of strong alliances with like-minded countries committed to democracy and freedom. I hope his family finds strength during this time of mourning and may his memory be a blessing.”

“Today we mourn the loss of a true mensch, Larry Weinberg,” Sen. Wyden added. “Seeing him and his wonderful wife Barbi cheering at every [Portland Trail Blazers] home game was the essence of [Portland] pride. He was my friend and like many, I will mourn his passing.”

Born on Jan. 23, 1926, Larry grew up in Brooklyn, New York. The son of Polish immigrants, he was raised with a strong patriotism, Jewish identity and commitment to service.

At age 17, Larry joined the U.S. Army and deployed to France in 1944. During his military service, he stepped on a land mine. While a new medicine, penicillin, saved his leg from infection, he was forced to undergo surgeries

and 11 months of rehabilitation to regain his mobility. For meritorious service in World War II, Larry received a Purple Heart, Combat Infantry Badge and the Bronze Star.

After years of success in the real estate business, in 1970, Larry helped establish a National Basketball Association (NBA) team, the Portland Trail Blazers, of which he was president when they won the NBA championship in 1977.

Larry's longstanding commitment to the U.S.-Israel relationship was reinforced by the 1967 Six-Day War, when Israel's Arab neighbors once again sought to destroy the nascent Jewish state. Larry realized that Israel needed a strong partnership with the United States to ensure its survival and wellbeing. In 1969, he and Barbi joined the then-tiny American Israel Public Affairs Committee, and within a decade he would become AIPAC's president.

"Larry and Barbi Weinberg were the father and mother of modern AIPAC," said AIPAC CEO Howard Kohr. "Larry exemplified what it means to be both a proud Zionist and a proud American."

When Larry was the president of from 1976-1982, AIPAC was led by an eight-person steering committee. As president, he began to lay the foundation for AIPAC's current lay-leader and regional model. "Larry and Barbi were such strong and passionate supporters of Israel, and that made a truly lasting impression. They played a vital role in forming the infrastructure of current-day

AIPAC and improved lay-leader involvement significantly," said former AIPAC President Bob Asher.



PHOTO: AIPAC

Former AIPAC President Larry Weinberg speaking at the 2009 AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington, D.C.

In addition to his own involvement, Larry also helped mentor many of AIPAC's current leaders. "Larry was my mentor and role model for more than 25 years. To say that he encouraged my pro-Israel activism would be an understatement.

I simply would not be on the AIPAC Board were it not for Larry Weinberg," AIPAC Board Member Michael Tuchin said.

Michael bonded with Larry after discovering what motivated him to join the pro-Israel movement. "As a proud young Jewish GI during World War II, Larry was very excited to be summoned by his commander to speak with a member of the Jewish resistance who had been hiding in the forest and

fighting the Nazis," Michael recalled. "Larry expected to be welcomed with open arms by this fellow Jew, who instead spit in Larry's face

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and shouted, ‘You came too late!’ Larry was shaken by this experience, and he vowed to do everything in his power to ensure that he, and our country, never came too late again. In the decades since that encounter, Larry has accomplished more on behalf of the Jewish people than anyone could have imagined.”

Known for his gentle nature and passion for the U.S.-Israel relationship, Larry cared so deeply about that relationship that he participated in AIPAC events even when he struggled to physically get around. With Barbi, he helped unite the pro-Israel community from across the political spectrum. Together, they inspired many others to join them, including members of their own family.

Larry is survived by his wife of 71 years, Barbi; their children, Jeff (and Susan), Jan (and Phil), Jimmy (and Leslie) and Julie (and Rand); and 12 grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren.

Last year, in what would be his final interview for AIPAC, Larry summed up his enduring commitment: “I mentioned at the beginning that I was wounded in 1944, and I promised, I prayed to God that if you save me I’ll try to be of help to the Jewish people. I’m now in the homestretch of my life. And I still feel that commitment. And whatever time I have left, I hope I can be good for my wife and my children, my grandchildren, my great-grandchildren. And I hope I can, in some way, fulfill that commitment. It isn’t really fulfilled because there’s so much to be done, but I try my best to help.”

May his memory be a blessing.  AIPAC

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

U.S.-ISRAEL MISSILE DEFENSE COOPERATION ADVANCES

There were two important milestones in U.S.-Israel missile defense cooperation this month.

On Jan. 22, the Israel Missile Defense Organization (IMDO) and the U.S. Missile Defense Agency (MDA) carried out a successful test of the Arrow-3 missile defense system in central Israel. The highly advanced system, designed to intercept ballistic missiles outside of the earth’s atmosphere, is the outermost layer of Israel’s multilayered missile defense shield.

“This successful test provides confidence in Israel’s capability to protect itself from existing threats in the region,” said MDA Director Lt. Gen. Samuel Greaves. “My congratulations to the Israel Missile Defense Organization, the Israeli Air Force, our MDA team, and our industry partners. We are committed to assisting the government of Israel in upgrading its national missile defense capability against emerging threats.”

And on Jan. 9, the U.S. Army announced it will acquire two Iron Dome batteries. The Israeli-developed rocket defense system will be used by the U.S. Army to protect ground forces against threats from unmanned air vehicles, mortars, rockets, artillery and cruise missiles.

The Iron Dome purchase is the latest in a long history of Israeli technologies being acquired by the U.S. military to protect American soldiers

and increase their effectiveness.

“We want to have some things in place that provide us some immediate protection,” the U.S. Army’s top procurement official, Bruce Jette, said. “So what that’s going to do is we’re going to look at things that are readily available.”

CONGRESS SPEAKS OUT ON SYRIA

Members of Congress from both parties have spoken out with concern over the announced U.S. troop withdrawal from Syria. In their remarks, the members highlighted the need to challenge Iran’s military presence in Syria.

“Such a move is premature and could empower ISIS to regroup and rebuild, inspire Assad to slaughter scores of innocent Syrians, strengthen Russia in the region, and embolden Iran and its Shia proxies to fill the void we’ve left behind,” said Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX), ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. “By removing our presence in Syria, we put our ally Israel in a very dangerous situation with having to deal with a growing Iranian military presence on its border.”

“I am deeply troubled by reports that President Trump has again instructed military leaders to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, despite indications from national security leaders that the fight against ISIS is not over... The void created by our absence will almost certainly be filled by countries like Russia and Iran that do not share our interests or those of our allies in the region,” said Rep. Nita Lowey (D-NY), chairwoman of the House Appropriations Committee.

“The Trump Administration’s withdrawal from Syria lacks any strategy, is foolhardy, and puts U.S. security in the Middle East, including our

ally the State of Israel, at great peril. This is not simply an error, it’s dangerous,” said Sen. Robert Menendez (D-NJ), ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

“The decision to pull U.S. defense presence out of Syria is a big mistake. The Syrian Democratic Forces and YPG will now abandon the fight against ISIS in the Middle Euphrates River Valley. Iran will step up activity in Southern Syria, which will elicit increased Israeli strikes that could lead to a new and far deadlier Israel-Hezbollah war. And our adversaries will use this as evidence that America is an unreliable partner. Today’s decision will lead to grave consequences in the months and years to come,” Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) added.

TOP ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS VISIT THE MIDDLE EAST, ISRAEL

In January, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton and Commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Gen. Joseph Votel visited the Middle East, continuing the diplomatic efforts to advance U.S. interests in the region.

On Jan. 10, Secretary Pompeo traveled to the region to meet with and reassure Gulf allies in the wake of President Trump’s recent announcement on Syria. In a major policy address in Cairo, the secretary pushed back on Iran’s malign behavior in the region. “It is important to know also that we will not ease our campaign to stop Iran’s malevolent influence and actions against this region and the world. The nations of the Middle East will never enjoy security, achieve economic stability, or advance the dreams of their people if Iran’s revolutionary regime persists on its current course,” he said.

During his visit to the Gulf, Secretary Pompeo

announced plans for an upcoming meeting in Warsaw this February for foreign ministers from countries across Europe, the Middle East and Asia to address Iran's destabilizing activities. Secretary Pompeo expressed his hopes that the meeting would facilitate an "enormous coalition that is prepared to assist in creating stability and peace here in the Middle East."

That same week, National Security Advisor Bolton traveled to Jerusalem to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. During the meeting, the two discussed the ongoing threat of Iran and enhanced bilateral cooperation between the two nations.

"We've got great challenges, for Israel, for the United States and the whole world. The Iran nuclear weapons program [and] the ballistic missile programs are right at the top of the list. So I'm delighted to be here, and look forward to our discussions," Bolton said.

On Jan. 23, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi awarded the IDF Medal of Appreciation to CENTCOM Commander Gen. Joseph Votel. The medal was awarded in recognition of Gen. Votel's personal leadership in furthering the exceptional partnership between the two militaries.

Gen. Votel's visit to Israel included discussions with IDF commanders covering several topics of mutual interest, such as the Iranian entrenchment in Syria, regional stability efforts, Operation Northern Shield and developments on the Lebanese border.

Describing Gen. Votel as a "true friend," Lt. Gen. Kochavi said, "You established a great relationship of wonderful cooperation, many unprecedented operations have taken place during your tenure, and I stand here with

all the military behind me, and I salute you." Kochavi added, "Every time we work with [the] United States..., I remind myself that this is not something that we can or should take for granted."

Gen. Votel responded, "It is a great honor for me to be here and receive this award today. I'm nearly speechless and overcome with very strong emotions and very strong feelings... My deep affection and respect for the IDF and the people that make up the IDF didn't start when I became the CENTCOM Commander or the SOCOM [United States Special Operations Command] Commander; it has existed for a very long time."

He went on to describe how Israel played a crucial role in helping the U.S. military address of threat of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which were killing American soldiers in Iraq. "Frankly, we were unprepared to deal with that," he said. "As I looked to try to address that for our army and for our Department of Defense, one of the key partners that I came to very early on was the IDF. And I would just say that we were supported so quickly and so thoroughly by the IDF, which shared everything that they had learnt about this particular threat with us. This allowed us to begin to move much more quickly to address this issue."

Gen. Votel concluded: "From that point forward, it became very clear to me that this was a great partnership which we had to continue fostering at any cost."

U.S. CONDEMNS IRAN SPACE LAUNCH

On Jan. 15, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo condemned Iran's failed attempt to launch a space vehicle, which involves technology that could be used in intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching America.

“In continued defiance of the international community and U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231, the Iranian regime fired off a space launch vehicle today. Such vehicles incorporate technologies that are virtually identical and interchangeable with those used in ballistic missiles, including intercontinental ballistic missiles. Today’s launch furthers Iran’s ability to eventually build such a weapon,” Pompeo said in a statement.

“We have been clear that we will not stand for Iran’s flagrant disregard for international norms. The United States is working with our allies and partners to counter the entire range of the Islamic Republic’s threats, including its missile program, which threatens Europe and the Middle East.”  AIPAC