

CONGRESSIONAL LEADERS COMMEMORATE ISRAEL'S 60TH ANNIVERSARY

Rep. Howard Berman (D-CA), Chairman House Foreign Affairs Committee

Mr. Speaker, in the sixty years since the founding of our ally Israel, the United States has had no greater friend in the Middle East. U.S.-Israeli friendship is based, first and foremost, on shared democratic values and our mutual pursuit of peace and stability in the Middle East, and it is buttressed by our nation's unshakeable commitment to Israel's security.

The remarkable story of Israel's foundation and survival is inspiring. Shortly after the decision by the United Nations to partition the Palestine of the British Mandate into Jewish and Arab states, Israel declared its independence on May 14, 1948, in Tel Aviv. In response, Israel's Arab neighbors invaded the new, and tiny, Jewish state. And, to the surprise of the so-called experts and pundits everywhere, the nascent Israel Defense Forces prevailed, defending the people of Israel and soundly defeating the Arab coalition.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy called the emergence of the state of Israel a "miracle of the 20th Century." However, Golda Meir once remarked that there had been too much self-sacrifice and too many lives lost for Israel's emergence to be considered a miracle.

But the establishment and evolution of the state of Israel can be considered without doubt one of the dazzling human achievements of our times. Hundreds of thousands of Jews and their descendants have escaped oppression -- or worse -- because Israel exists. Spurning the authoritarian model that dominates its region and persevering in a sea of enmity, Israel has built a world-class civilization: a vibrant democracy, a thriving economy, and a culturally and academically rich society.

The American people -- and particularly the United States Congress -- have contributed mightily to Israel's sustenance and security over the years. Of that we are justifiably proud.

But Israel's triumphant story is also tinged with tragedy. Each year, just before its Independence Day, Israel honors soldiers who have fallen in its defense. A siren sounds all over the nation, and Israelis everywhere stop to remember.

This minute of silence is a poignant memory for all who have witnessed it. But it is also, unfortunately, symbolic of Israel's wider regional reality. For Israel has lived under the Damoclean threat since its birth.

For years the Arab world sought to drive Israel into the sea. But eventually, after much death and destruction, the visionary Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and the wise Jordanian King Hussein recognized the value of peace and co-existence with Israel. And, although much of the Arab world's economic, cultural, and political boycott of Israel remains intact -- and terrorism has never ceased -- the prospect of a collective Arab military attack on Israel fortunately has faded in recent years.

Nevertheless, Israel today lives under potentially greater threats to its wellbeing and existence than ever before. The daily rocket assaults from Gaza, controlled by fundamentalist Hamas, have wreaked vast physical and psychological damage on the people of Sderot, not to mention the fact that they have killed more than a dozen Israelis. And increasingly sophisticated rockets are being used; they are more deadly accurate by the day, and they have greater range. In Israel's north, Hezbollah's replenished missile supply poses an even greater threat.

On the other end of the military spectrum, a theologically-based state – the Islamic Republic of Iran, whose President says Israel should be “wiped off the map” – is developing nuclear weapons and long-range missiles.

Now is not the time to go into detail about these threats. This body has spoken specifically to each of these dangers in the relatively recent past, and will do so again.

But now it is time to reaffirm our nation's pledge to Israel: that we will stand in solidarity with Israel against all violent assaults on its security and wellbeing.

And, most of all, it is the time to say to our friend and ally, Israel: Congratulations on your incredible social, political, economic, and technological achievements in the face of the most stupefying odds. We in the United States could not be prouder of our special relationship with you.