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Personal Reflection on Israel

My first visit to Israel was in November 2002, as part of a delegation hosted by New York's Jewish Community Relations Council, led by its Executive Director Rabbi Michael Miller. It was an especially difficult time in Israel. The "Massacre in Hebron" had just occurred and it was in the middle of the second intifada. We landed at Ben Gurion and drove to the King David hotel in Jerusalem. The hotel was completely empty. Nobody was there. To say the least, it was striking.

When we traveled, we were always accompanied by armed guards. There was chicken wire on the bus windows to protect us from shattered glass. I began to sense what ordinary Israelis have to deal with.

From the very beginning, the trip was an education for me, not only about the challenges that Israelis face, but how Israelis have overcome these threats to their very existence.

From Yad Vashem, to the Hadassah Hospital Skin Bank, to Albert Einstein University, to meeting with Daniel Kurtzer, the American Ambassador to Israel at the time – all of the meetings helped me to see, deeply, both the horrors that Israel faced and continues to face, and all that she has accomplished despite this.

I remember having an impressive meeting with General Raanan Gissin, then a Senior Advisor to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. This was followed by a very moving and thought-provoking meeting with Shimon Peres, who shared his personal views on why a two-state solution was the only real way Israel could ultimately have peace.

It started out as a deeply interesting, policy-oriented trip. Then something remarkable happened.

We walked over to the Old City. Looking around at the holy sites and all those who we saw, I realized, here I am, a nice Catholic kid from Long Island, walking where Jesus walked. It hit me like a thunderbolt. How amazingly fortunate I was. In this special piece of land, what had been a policy trip quickly transformed into a deeply religious experience.

I went to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. There I saw four denominations of Christendom, struggling over little pieces of the church. The irony of which denomination placed their candles where, while much larger battles raged outside the walls of the church, was not lost on me. Amidst it all, I was determined to grasp this unique spiritual opportunity.

I decided that night that I had to attend the 7 am Mass at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. But I knew that in order to do so, I'd have to sneak away from our minders and bodyguards, and slip into the Church for mass unescorted. I was worried about doing this. We had been instructed about the dangers of going out alone. Times in Israel were very dangerous. Though I was initially scared, by the time the mass was over, I found myself feeling very brave and courageous.

And then the second thunderbolt hit me.

Walking out of the church, refreshed in my faith, while also vainly congratulating myself on my swashbuckling act of derring-do, I saw the most mundane thing: A school bus pulled over to the curb, and a few dozen Israeli schoolgirls – all under 12 – got on board. I realized who the brave ones really were. These pre-teens who face these dangers day in and day out, they are the brave ones. So, too, the citizens who transformed the desert and made it bloom, they are the brave ones. The scientists who built first-class hospitals to care for all Israelis, and the technology that protects all Israelis, they, too, are the brave ones. The citizen-soldiers who fought time and again to protect the place where I now stood so that I could walk where Jesus walked. These soldiers, too, are the brave ones. Israel has succeeded in maintaining a democracy that respects all its inhabitants. Seeing all this and taking it all in gave me the intellectual and emotional knowledge that Israel is worthy of America's full support.

Protecting Israel

As the only true Democracy in the Middle East, Israel is an example of how Democracy can bring prosperity and hope to its citizens. But perhaps more importantly in these troubled times, it is a key strategic ally in an incredibly dangerous place, the Middle East. The US-Israeli partnership has been in place for more than 60 years old. It's a strong bond. But like any longstanding bond, we must constantly work to renew and strengthen it. Over the past eight years, it has been tested like never before. In Congress, I will be a strong voice to renew and strengthen our special bond.

We must strongly support military aid to and intelligence cooperation with Israel. It's in *our* interest to do so. Any hint that it could be at risk is a dangerous signal to Israel, and emboldens her/our shared enemies. I will vote to fund a renewed 10-year commitment of a minimum \$3.1 billion annually for military assistance.

Foreign aid is a major support to military aid, and it, too, should not be used as a stick to compel behavior. I will vote, as a Member of Congress, to continue foreign aid to Israel and America's other partners in the region.

We need to continue to cooperate with Israel, helping to fund the type of technology that produced the Iron Dome, Arrow, and David's Sling defense systems. In my congressional district, I will work to promote partnerships between our private companies and research institutions and the Israeli tech sector to enhance not just military applications, but clean energy, bioscience, and medical advancements.

Iran, Terrorism And Other Threats In The Region

The danger of Iran's possession of nuclear weapons is a danger too great for America to ever dismiss. Though the recent Nuclear Treaty with Iran reduces the possibility that Iran can develop a nuclear weapons capability, I am troubled by Iran's destabilizing actions in the region. It's why I would have voted against the administration's Iran deal and why I would vote to strengthen sanctions against Iran as well as ensuring that Iran pays a severe price for its malevolent actions. We might wish that the Iranian people were capable of changing the despotic, theocratic regime in place, but policy is not made by making wishes. I believe the Iran deal gave away too much. In dealing with Iran, we must leave no option off the table and the continued Iran

Sanctions Act will help ensure America's ability to hold Iran accountable.

President Reagan once said, "Trust, but verify." Whatever the good intentions behind the Nuclear Treaty, we have seen with Iran's most recent missile test that they are a country that simply cannot be trusted. They have proven, time and again, to be deceitful and duplicitous. America cannot allow Iran to pursue a policy that threatens Sunni states and provides Iran with hegemony over the region.

As a member of Congress, I will make sure our government is mindful of Iran's behavior and its designs. I will strive to assume a leadership role advocating for steps that protect Israel in any future dealings between America and Iran. Recent ballistic missile tests by Iran are a cause for great concern and a clear violation of international law, America and the international community must hold Iran accountable.

There remain so many other existential threats to Israel, and to Democracy and peace in the Middle East. Hezbollah, Hamas, ISIL, whoever is in charge this particular week in Syria, all of these are threats that Israel has reason to worry about. We need coordinated strategy with Israel to confront all these threats. We need to support Israel's right to pre-emptively defend herself against these threats, and recognize that we would do the same. We need to build a coalition to fight against Islamic Extremism in the Middle East. Needless to say, we have to back up our threats with actions. Drawing red lines in erasable ink makes no sense. When the United States of America says something can't happen, we have to back those words with actions.

The recent seemingly relentless wave of violent attacks and stabbings within Israel, and in areas expected to be part of Israel, remind us that we must constantly adapt our support for Israel to deal with new threats, both internal and external. This is where our close working relationship between leaders, really matters. Israel's security situation changes month-to-month, even week-to-week. We need leadership that's engaged in the mutual effort to protect Israel from her enemies.

The Peace Process

Israel is our best friend in the Middle East, and shares our values. Sometimes your friends do things you don't like, but loyalty is important among friends. You can privately scold your friends, but you don't shame them in public. It's

why one of my principles in politics is, "Make new friends, but don't forget the old ones." To have a Peace Process, you have to have a partner for Peace. Unfortunately, it is abundantly clear that currently no such partner exists. The Palestinian Authority cannot or will not cease tolerating inciteful behavior. Though the PA has cooperated with Israel in many areas, it appears to think that it can achieve its goals without the need to negotiate. Though the PA and Hamas have reached agreement time after time, they do not approach the situation the same way. It would be nice if Hamas paid attention to the needs of its inhabitants, rather than use them as cannon fodder. Hamas and Hezbollah remain terrorist organizations and America needs to make it clear that Israel has the right to defend itself when threatened by those who do not believe that Israel has the right to exist.

It is my fervent hope that a two state solution is where, one day, we end up. But there's a long way to go between here and the vision Shimon Peres outlined for me. The Palestinian people deserve a government that paves the roads, operates the sewers, educates its children and has a real ability to police them. The Palestinians feel hopeless because their corrupt government, with a leader in Abbas who has not even called for elections since his term ended long ago, has let them down. Hopelessness leads to despair and the recent violence is an outcome of such neglect. Only when the PA accepts the fact that they must live in peace with a democratic and Jewish State of Israel will there even be a possibility of a two state solution. It can and should be resolved by two partners willing to make the difficult compromises necessary to move forward. Israel cannot be coerced into making peace with a partner that cannot be trusted. Still, the US should be encouraging negotiations between the stakeholders through direct bilateral negotiations. The US must once again assume its role and its responsibility to our best friend in the region.