



Israel & America: An Unbreakable Bond

In my office I have a poster with a simple pink triangle and the words “Silence = Death”. This poster is rooted in the advocacy of the LGBTQ Community during the height of the AIDS crisis in the 80s and 90s. It’s a reminder that staying silent during a crisis contributes to your own demise. Israel is under perpetual threat from state and non-state actors, and those of us within the pro-Israel and progressive communities cannot afford to be silent. I believe in the power of advocacy and am blessed to live in a country where each of us has the right and responsibility to speak up and speak out on the issues that matter most. For me, our staunchest ally in the Middle East and the only Jewish state, Israel, is one of those issues.

As a gay Latino, I understand what it means to face discrimination and to fight for equality, dignity and respect. In Israel I see the manifestation of a nation-state founded by a group of persecuted people who after enduring centuries of antisemitism, pogroms and ultimately the Holocaust, reclaimed their narrative, and rose to push back against their own discrimination. Israel is the story of a people going from oppression to empowerment. It’s a story of a minority group taking a stand and fighting back. It’s a story that progressives should not only be proud of but one that they should also embrace. Israel’s story is a story that I’ve told without hesitation and one that I will continue to unabashedly tell as a member of Congress.

There are some who try to delegitimize Israel and paint it as a colonialist enterprise. That narrative insults the legacy of those who overcame tremendous odds to build a modern thriving democracy. As a member of Congress, I will forcefully and vocally push back against these anti-Israel attacks and work tirelessly to ensure that America continues to stand proudly in support of Israel.

I’m often asked why I speak so passionately about my support for Israel. The answer is simple: it’s the right thing to do. As a progressive advocate rooted in the fight for justice I see it as my responsibility to ensure that Israel is treated justly here in America and that we use our power and influence to pressure the international community to treat Israel justly on the international stage. Even when times are hard and the dynamics are difficult I pledge to never shy away from my pro-Israel advocacy.

Growing up my grandmother taught me a simple lesson: “pon tu granito de arena” --- the idea that we all have our grain of sand to contribute. I’ve decided that being a proud, vocal pro-Israel advocate is one of the ways that I will contribute my “grain of sand” and make the world a better place.

I first came to understand the importance of Israel through the influence of an elementary school teacher. As a Holocaust survivor, she spoke of how hate can lead to unspeakable horror, and in this case the murder of almost her entire family. Coming from a large Latino family I struggled to understand what it must have been like for her

to survive such a tragedy. Among the horror though, she spoke of a sign of hope in the shape of a new country called Israel. I was intrigued and wanted to learn more.

From a young age I had a desire to help others and thought the best way to do so would be by becoming a doctor. I never thought about politics. Motivated by diversifying my resume and helping to elect America's first woman president I decided to volunteer for Hillary Clinton's first presidential campaign. It was there that I met a group of women who referred to themselves as the "Yentas for Hillary". In addition to teaching me off-color Yiddish words and how to make good kugel, they taught me the importance of advocacy, political involvement, and talked about the diversity of issues that mattered to them, including Israel, and why it was important for Americans to support the Jewish state.

Following Hillary's primary loss I said I'd never work on a campaign again, but the "Yentas" recruited me to become an intern for a new campaign for an exciting young Congresswoman named Gabby Giffords. Gabby was a force in Arizona politics, and I came to know and respect her and her family. She was also a strong supporter of the U.S.-Israel relationship. My decision to work on her campaign would change the rest of my life. I worked for her campaigns for years and eventually she asked me to intern in her congressional office.

Five days into my congressional office internship a gunman disrupted a "Congress on Your Corner" event at a local grocery store. In an instant, eighteen people including the Congresswoman were shot right in front of my eyes. Six people died. Minutes after the shooting a sheriff's deputy arrived on the scene with an emergency kit that included a bandage developed in Israel by an IDF medic. In the middle of a chaotic nightmare, as I helped attend to the Congresswoman, that bandage helped to save her life. In 2012 it was humbling to meet and thank the man who created that bandage and appear with him on stage at AIPAC's Policy Conference.

Motivated by the horrific events that day, and understanding my ability to impact change, I decided to pursue a career in public service. In 2011, when I won a seat on my local school board, I was invited to Israel for the first time as a part of the American Israel Education Foundation (AIEF) Latino Leaders mission. We were scheduled to travel during operation "Pillar of Defense" and as people were withdrawing due to the ongoing conflict, I boarded the flight without hesitation. I was determined to experience the Israel I had learned about from my teacher, "the Yentas" and Gabby; and the Israel that invented the bandage that helped save Gabby's life.

When I returned from Israel, I was able to contextualize everything that I'd heard and read. Standing in Jerusalem I realized that end to end this tiny country was smaller than my home state of Arizona. I remember meeting with social workers and teachers in Kfar Aza and hearing how they developed tools to help young children cope with post-traumatic stress from the sounds of sirens and threat of bombs. I can still smell the shells collected by the police stored at the police station in Sderot.

When I returned from my trip, I knew I had a responsibility to speak out about Israel. I worked with various organizations to become better educated and got more involved. Within the last decade I've spoken at over 100 pro-Israel events. I gotten to know the pro-Israel community and soon understood that while the "yentas" would always serve as a backbone of the movement, it was essential to work to ensure that other minority voices were represented. I began looking for others that looked like me--- LGBTQ folks, progressives, and Latinos, and helped to get them to join the mosaic that is our pro-Israel movement.

In the years since I traveled to Israel, I've expanded my work in our movement. In 2018 I joined the board of A Wider Bridge, an organization working through education, advocacy, relationship-building and grant-making to create equality in Israel by expanding LGBTQ inclusion in Israel and equality for Israel by cultivating constructive engagement with Israel. I also helped lead a delegation of Arizona state lawmakers and business leaders to open a trade office between the state and Israel.

I live in hope that one day in the hopefully not too distant future all people living in Israel can live without the constant threat of terror. I'm committed to being a good partner to ensure that this day will come sooner rather than later.

IRAN

Iran is the leading state-sponsor of terrorism and their nuclear and regional ambitions are arguably the greatest threat to global peace and security. In addition to financing regional terrorism in Yemen, leading Hamas and Hezbollah in a proxy war against Israel, oppressing dissidents and killing members of the LGBTQ community, the Iranians have been developing an illicit nuclear program for decades. Given their record on human rights and their nuclear ambitions it's clear that America must do everything in our power to ensure that Iran never develops nuclear weapons.

I believe that sanctions historically have proven effective in pressuring the Iranians and forcing them to join the international community at the negotiating table. I was appreciative of the Obama administration's efforts to negotiate a peaceful resolution to Iran's nuclear ambitions. I was deeply concerned, however, that the JCPOA did not prevent the Iranians from developing a nuclear weapon in the long-term, nor did it go far enough to protect the regional interests of either the United States or Israel. In 2015 I joined with dozens of pro-Israel advocates to lobby members of Congress to oppose the JCPOA.

As fiercely as I opposed the JCPOA in 2015, I was concerned by the abrupt withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA under the Trump administration. I am hopeful that under the leadership of the Biden administration we will see a new deal that will permanently halt Iran's nuclear ambitions. There is currently a debate within the administration about how to best bring the Iranians to the table for negotiations. I am supportive of the administration's efforts to obtain a "longer and stronger" deal. As a Member of Congress, I will not support easing of sanctions before the Iranians take tangible action to curtail their nuclear program. Successful negotiations will require Iran to eliminate their ballistic missile program, curtail their financing of international terror, and agree to anytime, anywhere inspections particularly as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has recently discovered uranium particles at undeclared nuclear sites.

FOREIGN AID, THE 10 YEAR MOU AND ISRAEL'S RIGHT TO SELF DEFENSE

America's security assistance to Israel should be viewed as a strategic investment in regional stability and a smart, effective way for America to pursue our regional goals without having to put boots on the ground. Additionally, given that Israeli foreign aid must be spent in the United States, these funds are critical to the defense industry which is a prominent employer and economic engine for my district. As a result, I am supportive of the

memorandum of understanding that was negotiated under the Obama administration that establishes funding levels for U.S. security assistance and foreign aid to Israel over a ten-year period that allows Israel to maintain its qualitative military edge.

As someone who has Raytheon in their district, I know how vital it is that our two countries have mutual cooperation. Iron dome is a testament to the friendship between our two countries. Israeli innovation has meant the saving of countless lives around the world including many American lives. Israel's qualitative military edge is possible only with the ongoing support of the United States. I've supported this as an advocate and will fight for it as a member of the US House of Representatives. I would also be supportive of providing Israel with additional aid above what is specified in the 10 year MOU to rearm and restock Iron Dome so that Israel can continue to defend its people against indiscriminate rocket fire.

I am deeply concerned by growing calls by some within the Democratic party to condition or withhold U.S. foreign aid to Israel in order to pressure Israel to pursue a path that may not align with its strategic interests. I'm supportive of continuing this aid without preconditions, and I agree with President Biden's recent description of attempts to condition aid to Israel as "irresponsible."

As we've seen in recent days with the indiscriminate shelling by Hamas of Israeli civilians, we must continue to provide material and defensive support for our one and only Democratic partner in the Middle East. While I may not agree with every position that the Israeli government has taken, I know that our values unite us and I am unequivocal in my support of Israel's right to defend itself against terrorism. On May 18th, 2021, I along with my Republican colleague Senator Paul Boyer introduced a proclamation from the state of Arizona that reaffirms Israel's right to defend itself.

HAMAS AND HEZBOLLAH

Over the past several weeks I watched in horror as Israel faced thousands of indiscriminate rockets fired mainly from civilian locations by Hamas in the Gaza Strip. While I mourn the loss of life on both sides of the conflict, I understand that Israel works to prevent the loss of civilian life while Hamas, unfortunately, hides behind their civilians knowing all too well of the sympathy that will come from a news report over the death of a child. My heart is with both the Israeli people and the people of Gaza who both tragically suffered damages and loss of life as a result of Hamas' irresponsible and brazen actions. We must call Hamas what it is: a terrorist organization that is focused on Israel's destruction at all costs. Until Hamas gives up their weapons, recognizes Israel, and stops promoting antisemitic propaganda to Palestinian children, there will not be peace.

I am deeply concerned about the potential for future altercations between Hezbollah in Lebanon and Israel. Hezbollah has hundreds of thousands of rockets and missiles largely stored in civilian locations that if fired en masse could easily overwhelm Israel's defensive capabilities. The United States must work to ensure that Israel has everything it needs to defend its citizens against BOTH the threat from Hamas and the threat from Hezbollah.

ABRAHAM ACCORDS

I welcome the normalization agreements recently signed between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan and view them as a sign of the improving relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors. As a member of Congress, I will work to strengthen these agreements and would be supportive of efforts such as the bipartisan Israel Relations Normalization Act. I am also confident that the Biden administration will continue to build upon the efforts of the previous administration to encourage additional countries in the region to normalize their relations with Israel.

A TWO-STATE SOLUTION

I am not blind to the suffering of the Palestinian people. The situation in Gaza is tragic. The people of Gaza are in dire need of opportunity and financial assistance. I am supportive of restoring parts of the aid that was cut to the Palestinians during the Trump administration, but the United States must ensure that the aid flows directly to the NGOs and other organizations working on the ground to rebuild Gaza and improve the lives of the Palestinians and NOT to Hamas who will use the money to further build their arsenal and enhance their network of terror tunnels. I would be supportive of legislation like the bipartisan Hamas International Financing Prevention Act to tighten sanctions on entities who continue to sponsor terror in the region. The needs of the Palestinian people in Gaza are real, and we cannot allow Hamas to steal from their own people any longer.

I am committed to creating the space for a two-state solution that will ensure that all Israelis and Palestinians have the right to peace and dignity and the ability to live out their lives without fear. Palestinians want peace but the leadership of groups like Hamas and the Palestinian Authority have delayed the process and exacerbated tensions. I've heard this firsthand in conversations with average Palestinians during my trips to the Middle East.

We must hold the Palestinian Authority and Hamas responsible for the continuation of the conflict and the suffering of the Palestinian people. It is tragic and unacceptable that the Palestinian leadership continues to prioritize the destruction of Israel over nation building and the care of their own people. The United States should continue to play a leadership role in pursuing peace and help the parties work towards a two-state solution; however, a lasting peace can only be achieved through direct negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians.

STATE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The strong bilateral relationship between the US and Israel is important to me personally, and as a state legislator I fought to secure funds for a trade office between Arizona and Israel. I helped lead a bipartisan delegation of Arizona state lawmakers to Israel in 2019. My unwavering support of Israel led me to secure multiple bipartisan proclamations and resolutions recognizing Israel's right to exist and honoring its Independence Day.

I was also a leader, along with my sister Representative Alma Hernandez, in the fight to add language defining anti-Semitism especially given the increase in violence against the Jewish community. With the recent increase in anti-Semitism, two synagogues in our community, in the Tucson I know and love, have faced horrific antisemitic

attacks. We see an alarming amount of growth in antisemitic violence and it is a moral imperative that we call it out in all its forms.

BDS

The BDS movement is a pernicious attempt to undermine the legitimacy of Israel and I have fought for years to stop it from gaining a foothold at university campuses around the country. I was also one of less than five Democrats in the Arizona House to support legislation banning any Arizona government entity from adopting BDS and as a member of Congress I will continue these efforts.

STRENGTHENING THE U.S.-ISRAEL RELATIONSHIP

With the safety and security of Israel at stake, I know that now more than ever it is vital that we stand up and show our support for our one and only Democratic partner in the Middle East. When I am elected to Congress, I will continue to fight and advocate for a stronger relationship between our two nations.

I look forward to a time when we can turn our focus away from issues of defense and concentrate on areas of mutual interest and collaboration. Israel and Arizona share so much in common--- our climate, our growing cities, our centers of innovation, and the opportunities for collaboration are infinite. As a member of Congress, I look forward to working to encourage collaboration between my district and Israel in the areas of water, solar and cyber technology.

As we look to the future, I am excited about the possibility for continued collaboration between our two countries. From the Israeli bandage which helped save the lives of countless Americans like Gabby to the Soda Stream that many have on their kitchen counters. Our two countries are partners in ways that many don't realize and the bond between Israel and America is unbreakable.