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Nearly 300 Congress members declare commitment to 'unbreakable' U.S.-Israel bond

By Natasha Mozgavaya, Haaretz Correspondent

Nearly 300 members of Congress have signed on to a declaration reaffirming their commitment to "the unbreakable bond that exists between [U.S.] and the State of Israel", in a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

The letter was sent in the wake of the severe recent tensions between Israel and the U.S. over the prior's decision to construct more than 1,600 new housing units in East Jerusalem, a project it announced during U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's visit to the region.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took advantage of his trip to the United States this week to try to mend the rift with the Obama administration, but he was greeted with cold welcome by the White House.

Netanyahu also met during his visit with members of Congress, who welcomed him with significantly more warmth.

The letter from Congress expresses its "deep concern" over the U.S.-Israel crisis, and emphasizes that lawmakers had received assurances from Netanyahu that the events leading up to the recent tensions would not be repeated.

Letter from members of Congress

Dear Secretary Clinton:

We are writing to reaffirm our commitment to the unbreakable bond that exists between our country and the State of Israel and to express to you our deep concern over recent tension. In every important relationship, there will be occasional misunderstandings and conflicts.

The announcement during Vice President Biden's visit was, as Israel's Prime Minister said in an apology to the United States, "a regrettable incident that was done in all innocence and was hurtful, and which certainly should not have occurred." We are reassured that Prime Minister Netanyahu's commitment to put in place new procedures will ensure that such surprises, however unintended, will not recur.

The United States and Israel are close allies whose people share a deep and abiding friendship based on a shared commitment to core values including democracy, human rights and freedom of the press and religion. Our two countries are partners in the fight against terrorism and share an important strategic relationship.

A strong Israel is an asset to the national security of the United States and brings stability to the Middle East. We are concerned that the highly publicized tensions in the relationship will not advance the interests the U.S. and Israel share. Above all, we must remain focused on the threat posed by the Iranian nuclear weapons program to Middle East peace and stability.

From the moment of Israel's creation, successive U.S. administrations have appreciated the special bond between the U.S. and Israel.

For decades, strong, bipartisan Congressional support for Israel, including security assistance and other important measures, have been eloquent testimony to our commitment to Israel's security, which remains unswerving.

It is the very strength of this relationship that has, in fact, made Arab-

Israeli peace agreements possible, both because it convinced those who sought Israel's destruction to abandon any such hope and because it gave successive Israeli governments the confidence to take calculated risks for peace.

In its declaration of independence 62 years ago, Israel declared: "We extend our hand to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighborliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land."

In the decades since, despite constantly having to defend itself from attack, Israel has repeatedly made good on that pledge by offering to undertake painful risks to reach peace with its neighbors.

Our valuable bilateral relationship with Israel needs and deserves constant reinforcement.

As the Vice-President said during his recent visit to Israel: "Progress occurs in the Middle East when everyone knows there is simply no space between the U.S. and Israel when it comes to security, none. No space."

Steadfast American backing has helped lead to Israeli peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan. And American involvement continues to be critical to the effort to achieve peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

We recognize that, despite the extraordinary closeness between our country and Israel, there will be differences over issues both large and small.

Our view is that such differences are best resolved quietly, in trust and confidence, as befits longstanding strategic allies. We hope and expect that, with mutual effort and good faith, the United States and Israel will move beyond this disruption quickly, to the lasting benefit of both nations.

We believe, as President Obama said, that "Israel's security is paramount" in our Middle East policy and that "it is in U.S. national security interests to assure that Israel's security as an independent

Jewish state is maintained."

In that spirit, we look forward to working with you to achieve the common objectives of the U.S. and Israel, especially regional security and peace.

Sincerely,

STENY HOYER ERIC CANTOR

HOWARD L. BERMAN ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN

GARY ACKERMAN DAN BURTO