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Annual Report of Accomplishments

2008



AMERICAN JEWISH CONGRESS 2008 ANNUAL REPORT OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS

As 2008 draws to a close, we look back on a year of momentous change and challenge. Our country continues to be in the throes of an economic upheaval, while a divisive presidential campaign and election have forced us to confront deep political rifts and urgent questions affecting the future of all Americans and, indeed, the entire world.

The American Jewish Congress entered 2008 with an ambitious, activist agenda. In his inaugural year as AJCongress' president, Richard S. Gordon committed the agency to a broad agenda, but focused on five specific areas of endeavor:

- **ISRAEL:** We worked to focus the world's attention on the unacceptable use terrorists make of Human Shields, endangering the lives of innocent civilians. We continue to advocate redefining Israel's relationship with NATO—a substantive initiative to upgrade Israel's standing in the community of Western nations—while simultaneously pursuing longstanding efforts to ensure that Israel is treated fairly by the United Nations. Ongoing projects include the America-Israel Dialogue, Annual Jerusalem Conference of Mayors and the Hasbara Training Program.
- **CIVIL RIGHTS & SOCIAL JUSTICE:** In the forefront is our newest initiative, the *Coalition to Defend Free Speech*, leading the way in bringing together a broad spectrum of organizations to combat the Organization of the Islamic Conference's

call for the criminalization of speech perceived to be defamatory of religion—especially Islam. AJCongress is also leading a fight in the U.S. Congress and state legislatures to insure that libel judgments entered on behalf of plaintiffs traveling to countries with plaintiff-friendly libel laws to challenge their critics, cannot be enforced in the United States. As always, we continue in our role as the Attorney General of the Jewish People, working in the U.S. courts on cases relating to the Separation of Church and State and in defense of the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses.

- **WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT:** Under the new presidency of Meryl L. Frank, Mayor of Highland Park, New Jersey, the Women's Division of AJCongress began 2008 by creating a firestorm when it focused unprecedented national and international media attention on *Ms.* magazine's refusal to publish our advertisement celebrating and highlighting the achievements of Israeli women. Work moves forward on a groundbreaking conference in June 2009, *Gender and Justice: An International Inquiry*, which will bring together women judges from across the globe, including judges from Israel and moderate Moslem nations.
- **ENERGY INDEPENDENCE:** December 2007 marked the culmination of four years of intensive, persistent efforts towards the enactment into law by the U.S. Congress of the U.S.-Israel Energy Cooperation Act (USIECA). We continued in 2008 to press for the allocation of adequate funding for this vital project, whose objective is to harness the combined, superior technology and scientific know-how of Israel and America in a joint effort to break dependence on foreign oil—the majority of which is now controlled by nations with agendas inimical to our own.

**We have been able to make a
difference in these areas
because of your support
and generosity.
We need that support now
more than ever.**

ISRAEL

A high point in the 2008 year was the celebration of **Israel's 60th anniversary** as a nation. Richard S. Gordon was a member of President George W. Bush's blue ribbon delegation to the festivities. He attended a special Knesset session, President Bush's speech and the reception he hosted at the Israel Museum with top Israeli dignitaries. Mr. Gordon took the opportunity of this visit to also meet privately with Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in Ramallah, discussing his efforts to establish security controls in the West Bank and to stimulate the Palestinian economy.



AJCongress President Richard S. Gordon with Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in Jerusalem.

Under the aegis of **The Martin Steinberg Charitable Trust**, we selected and administered projects in Israel endowed through the extraordinary beneficence and foresight of AJCongress' longtime leaders, Lillian and Martin Steinberg. This year, the Trust made a number of significant grants that have improved the lives of Israeli citizens.

Among these were **two projects designed to help residents of Sderot**, a town then under constant bombardment from the Gaza Strip. Through its contribution to Operation Life Shields, **AJCongress provided bus stop shelters to protect citizens from rocket attacks.**

A second initiative, personally overseen by Knesset member Mickey Eitan, provided a computer center facilitating remote-distance learning use, allowing people in Sderot to remain connected to the outside world by computer during periods when they were under fire and confined to their nearest bomb shelters. Another noteworthy effort was the **funding of the Ashdod Medical Center**, (currently under construction) to provide a quarter of a million residents with desperately needed state-of-the-art emergency and community health services. Shockingly, to date, there are no critical care service centers in Ashdod, one of Israel's largest cities.



Richard S. Gordon with Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in Ramallah.

The 26th Annual American Jewish Congress Jerusalem Conference of Mayors was held in September. Done in conjunction with the Council for World Jewry and Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it attracted an impressive group of over 50 mayors from five continents. Richard S. Gordon said that, in addition to providing this diverse group of mayors with a hands-on opportunity to learn about Israel in the broadest sense, and Jerusalem in particular, these officials "left with a deeper and richer understanding of Israel and what, as a nation and Jerusalem as a city, they have experienced and are experiencing on a daily basis." This year's session included international mayors from Addis Ababa, Bialystok, Budapest, Columbo, Dar Es Salaam, Entebbe, Istanbul, Kadikoy, Kinshasha, Limassol, Nairobi and Sofia, as well as mayors from Albuquerque, Augusta, Hartford, Lansing, Nashville and Tucson. "This important annual event promotes dialogue and a strengthening of relations between Israel and the other countries of the world in a way that rarely occurs at other forums," stated Jack Rosen, AJCongress Chair. In addition to mutually beneficial and innovative business opportunities, the Conference provides a unique forum for the development of new friends for Israel. For example, who could have imagined in 1976, when Israeli commandos raided Entebbe Airport to rescue 100 Israeli and Jewish hostages, that 32 years later, Ugandan officials would enthusiastically participate in a very public event in Jerusalem. Over the years, the Conference has produced enduring relationships between mayors around the world and their Israeli counterparts—a quantifiable measure of the importance of this annual program.

At the end of October, a group of **American-Latino high-tech executives made their first visit ever to Israel under Jewish auspices**. The AJCongress sponsored and organized the five-day trip to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem to showcase Israel's growing technology industry and develop a meaningful relationship with the fastest-growing population in the United States. The business executives who participated represented a cross section of the high-tech community. They met with their Israeli counterparts in business and research to explore joint ventures and investment opportunities in Israel, and were hosted by ministerial and trade officials and members of the Knesset and Israeli cabinet. It was an important mutual exchange of ideas and information, with long-range and positive implications for all concerned.

Hasbara, a signature 25-year AJCongress program of which we are justly proud, has, in conjunction with the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, provided Hasbara (literally, 'explanation') training sessions for the purpose of strengthening Israel's image and clarifying its message in the Western press. Intensive all-day workshops are conducted in New York over a three-day period, attended by Israeli diplomats and government officials from across the spectrum, who are trained in the latest and most effective public relations techniques, so as to become accomplished spokespersons, adept at making Israel's case to the public through the media. The Hasbara Training Seminars provide instruction at the highest level, under the direction of Elias (Buck) Buchwald, former vice chair of the well-regarded Burson-Marsteller Public Relations Agency.

In November 2008, AJCongress played host to its most prestigious group of Hasbara participants to date. On the invitation list were all of the Consuls General in the United

States and Canada, the Israeli Ambassador to Canada and the official IDF spokesman. The attendees received intensive on-camera instruction and heard from outside experts in the field. This training program is unique in scope and highly regarded by past participants because of its success and proven track record. Its graduates have gone on to high level postings in Israel and around the world. **The government of the State of Israel has called the Hasbara Training Seminars "the single most important media skills program in which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is involved."**

In 2007, the AJCongress established **The NATO Project**, a joint effort with the Atlantic Forum of Israel (AFI), to serve as its exclusive representative and partner in the United and Europe to seek **to upgrade Israel's relationship with NATO from that of a Mediterranean Dialogue participant to that of a full-fledged NATO partner**. Supporting us in this initiative is H.E. José María Aznar, former Prime Minister of Spain, who has long advocated that "Israel is the West" and, as such, should be part of NATO.

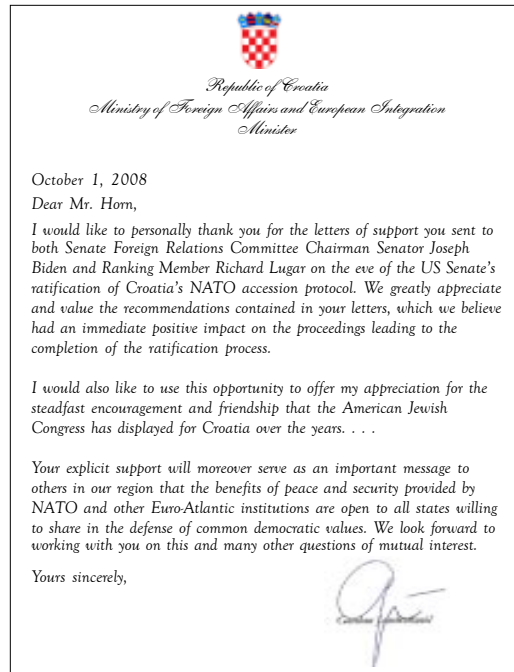
In late 2007, along with the AFI and Members of the Knesset, AJCongress participated in high-level meetings at NATO Headquarters in Brussels to discuss the importance of upgrading Israel's relationship with NATO. The meetings concluded with a serious discussion with NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer. Subsequently, AJCongress National Policy Director Matthew Mark Horn participated in the 2nd Annual NATO-Israel symposium held in Herzliya, where discussions were held at the highest levels, including meetings with the NATO Deputy Secretary General Bisogniero. Both Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and opposition leader Bibi Netanyahu emphasized the importance of upgrading Israel's relationship with NATO.



NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer (l) with Acting co-Executive Director Matthew Mark Horn at NAGO headquarters in Brussels, Belgium.

At the **2008 Herzliya National Security Conference**, Mr. Horn participated in a panel entitled, "Upgrading Israel's Relations with the Atlantic Community." AJCongress participated in the **Bucharest Conference** in April 2008, where we held discussions and briefed key policymakers on this issue. During our Annual Meeting in May 2008, the National Capitol Region hosted a dinner that showcased the NATO-Israel joint project. Distinguished speakers were Rafael Bardaji, National Security Advisor to former Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar, Dr. Herbert London, President of the Hudson Institute and current chair of AJCongress' Governing Council and Harley Lippman, Chairman of AJCongress' Board of Trustees. In July 2008, **AJCongress participated in the Croatia Summit**, where we once again briefed heads of state and key staff on the importance of the project.

Also in July, at the invitation of House Committee on Foreign Affairs' (HCFA) Chairman of its Europe Subcommittee, **AJCongress and the AFI co-authored a statement for a joint Congressional hearing, entitled "Europe and Israel: Strengthening the Partnership."** AJCongress was asked by Europe Subcommittee Chairman Robert Wexler (D-FL) to assist with organizing the NATO-Israel part of the hearing. We also participated in high-level, invitation-only discussions with leading experts from Israel and Europe on the subject, and we offered our support to allies who support our goals, such as Croatia and Albania, in their own efforts to join NATO. In November 2008, **AJCongress and the AFI led a joint delegation to Berlin to attend the Atlantic Treaty Organization's 54th General Assembly.** In addition to participating in



From the thank-you letter of Croatia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, H.E. Gordana Jandroković, to AJCongress.

working with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to hold a similar hearing. Legislation calling on NATO to upgrade Israel's formal relationship with the body was introduced in the just-completed session of Congress and will be re-crafted and reintroduced in the 111th Congressional session.

We promote our views on these issues in a variety of fora. **At the invitation of the U.S. Senate's Democratic Policy Committee in April of 2008, Richard S. Gordon briefed the Senators on two of our key international programs:** the law of war and the use of asymmetric warfare in the form of human shields as set forth in H.Res. 125; and the importance of upgrading Israel's formal relationship with NATO. His remarks were well received by the Senators.

sessions with the Secretary General of NATO, German Chancellor Merkel, the Foreign Minister and members of the Bundestag, the delegation met with leading European military and political leaders. The end of the year will culminate in a joint **AJCongress-AFI delegation to NATO headquarters in Brussels to meet with the NATO Secretary General, senior NATO leadership and key NATO ambassadors and military personnel.**

The Europe Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee has asked AJCongress to assist with, and testify at, a Congressional hearing dedicated solely to the importance of upgrading Israel's formal relationship with NATO. The House Committee on Foreign Affairs is

CIVIL RIGHTS & SOCIAL JUSTICE

In an important new 2008 initiative engaging a broad alliance of Jewish, Christian, Muslim and secular organizations, the American Jewish Congress launched the **Coalition to Defend Free Speech.** Participating organizations include Freedom House, the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, the International Quranic Center, American Values, and the Rutherford Institute. The purpose of the coalition is to fight an effort by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to make speech "defamatory of religion, especially Islam" illegal everywhere under international law.

In the Coalition's first press conference, October 2nd in Washington DC, the honorary chair, acclaimed First Amendment lawyer Floyd Abrams, said that the coalition has come together to resist "the intolerable effort of one group of nations to determine what may be thought and said throughout the world." Upcoming actions include a teach-in at the UN, when a committee will be in session to discuss the issue relative to the Geneva "Durban Review" conference.



Coalition to Defend Free Speech inaugural press conference, the National Press Club, Washington, DC. Richard S. Gordon introducing speakers (l. to r.): Seamus Hasson, Floyd Abrams, John Wohlstetter. (not shown: speaker Paula Schreiber)

In other important initiatives, the American Jewish Congress was active in supporting legislation, locally in New York state and nationally in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, to protect American journalists from libel suits brought in foreign courts that do not have the same protections for free speech that are found in the U.S. Constitution. This practice, known as "**Libel Tourism,**" describes a tactic in which people described negatively in American publications roam the world to search out friendly venues in which to sue American authors. It both intimidates individuals into silence and forecloses inquiries into the funding sources of terrorism. "If an American writer lost a libel suit in a foreign country and had a judgment entered against him or her, a foreign plaintiff could collect such a judgment in this country," said John Wohlstetter, Project Coordinator for AJCongress' Project to Preserve Free Speech. "The current international climate has made it all the more urgent for Congress to act. . . . Americans need to let the world know that our commitment to the right of free speech is unshakable."

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

January 2008 started not with a whimper, but with a bang for the Women's Division, when *Ms.* magazine rejected an ad that did nothing more controversial than call attention to the fact that women currently occupy three of the most significant positions of power in Israel. The ad consisted of photos of Supreme Court Chief Justice Dorit Beinish, Vice Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Tzipi Livi, and Knesset Speaker Dalia Itzik, accompanied simply with the text "This Is Israel." *Ms.* justified its actions by saying that the ad would "set off a firestorm" and that "there are

very strong opinions" on the subject. AJCongress president Richard S. Gordon responded that "Since there is nothing about the ad itself that is offensive, it is obviously the nationality of the women pictured that the management of *Ms.* fears their readers would find objectionable." He added that "this is nothing short of disgusting and despicable."

The controversy erupted in the press, as **hundreds of newspapers, magazines and blogs reported on the ad and debated the story, and leading Jewish feminists gathered in New York for a press conference demanding that *Ms.* reverse its decision.** The AJCongress website alone received thousands of letters of support. In an interesting turn of events, in March, *The Nation*, America's oldest



The advertisement that Ms. magazine refused to print—which then ran in The Nation.

continuous weekly magazine and a flagship of the broad American liberal left, offered and subsequently ran the ad that *Ms.* feared to publish—on its back cover.

Also in March, AJCongress announced the appointment of Meryl L. Frank, Mayor of Highland Park, New Jersey, as the Women's Division's new president. She led a Women's Empowerment session at the May Annual Meeting, joined by speakers Margery Kraus, president and CEO of APCO Worldwide, Eti Livni, Former Deputy Speaker of the Knesset & Chairperson of the Committee for the Advancement of the Status of Women, and Harriet Kurlander, Executive Director of the Women's Division, providing an overview of the Women's Division's 75-year history at the American Jewish Congress.



Women's Division President Meryl L. Frank, Women's Empowerment session at the 2008 Annual Meeting.

The American Jewish Congress will sponsor a major international conference in June, 2009, entitled **Gender and Justice: An International Inquiry**. The conference, co-sponsored by American University Washington College of Law, will gather women judges from around the world to examine the challenges women face and opportunities for using law to improve women's lives. Judges from the courts in Israel, Ghana, Sri Lanka, Jordan, Cameroon, among others, will join American judicial counterparts. Special emphasis will be on including judges from countries that have only recently begun to place women on the bench and from countries whose governments make little or no effort to effect implementation of constitutionally-mandated gender equality. Among the topics to be discussed are: the status of women in the courts; the impact of religion and tradition on judging; the role of the courts in ending violence against women; and maintaining judicial independence in times of crisis.

ENERGY INDEPENDENCE

Americans who watched the real-time public opinion polls conducted during the 2008 presidential debates discovered very quickly that whenever either candidate spoke about freeing the United States from its dependence on foreign oil—which both did with increasing emphasis—Americans responded extremely favorably. This was not always the case. Only a few years ago, AJCongress stood alone within the Jewish community in warning of the dangers of feeding our addiction to foreign oil by sending petrodollars to countries funding radical Islamic groups, and those who seek the destruction of Israel—such as Iran. We cannot afford to allow ourselves to be at the mercy of those whose goals are inimical to ours and Israel's.

We began 2008 with a great victory. **Four years of hard work by the American Jewish Congress Energy Independence Task Force signature project—the U.S./Israel Energy Cooperation Act (USIECA)—resulted in its passage by Congress as a provision of the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007.** It was signed into law by the President on December 19, 2007. As expressed by Jack Halpern, Chairman of the Energy Inde-

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES-110th Cong., 1st Sess. H.R. 6

To move the United States toward greater energy independence and security, to increase the production of clean renewable fuels, to protect consumers, to increase the efficiency of products, buildings, and vehicles, to promote research on and deploy greenhouse gas capture and storage options, and to improve the energy performance of the Federal Government, and for other purposes.

21 SEC. 917. UNITED STATES-ISRAEL ENERGY COOPERATION.

22 (a) FINDINGS—Congress finds that
23 (1) it is in the highest national security inter-
24 ests of the United States to develop renewable en-
25 ergy sources;

Opening paragraphs of USIECA bill passed in Congress.

pendence Task Force, “We take extraordinary pride in the success of this bill because of the many years we put into the effort for its enactment, beginning with our conceptualization of the measure in 2003, through lobbying for the measure for the past four years. USIECA



Jack Halpern, Chairman of the Energy Independence Task Force, at Annual Meeting 2008.

represents a crucial step in helping the United States and other industrialized nations reduce dependence on imported oil, by working together with Israel’s brilliant scientists and engineers to help devise alternative energy technologies.”

Enactment of USIECA was only step one. **In 2008, AJCongress reinforced its efforts for appropriations to carry on USIECA’s important task of joint U.S./Israeli projects to help achieve the goal of energy independence.** We also considered it an important task to continue our outreach to the business and lay communities to keep alive and strong the message that we cannot allow ourselves to rely on others to supply domestic energy needs.

In March, 2008, **AJCongress hosted Israel’s Minister for National Infrastructures, General Binyamin (“Fouad”) Ben-Eliezer, who spoke to a high-level group**

of business executives about the national security implications of the West’s reliance on oil and the economic potential for U.S./Israeli alternative energy collaborations.

In April, Southwest Regional Director Gil Elan lectured at a Shearith Israel event in Dallas on AJCongress’ alternative energy program. The Pacific Southwest Region was active in lobbying key congressional members and their staffs to encourage passage of USIECA. The region has more recently held meetings with the Brazilian Consul General and the head of the Brazilian sugar ethanol industry to investigate possible AJCongress actions with regard to this alternative energy industry. This past summer, the writer Edwin Black

lectured on the subject of energy independence at a New Jersey regional event.

AJCongress’ Annual Meeting in Washington had a special Breakfast Session devoted to the issue of Energy Independence. High school and college winners of the American Jewish Congress Energy Essay Contest read their essays and were awarded Israel bonds. Representative Brad Sherman presented them with Congressional commendations.



AJCongress Energy Essay Contest winners Samantha Alman and Justin F. Grodman receiving awards from Representative Brad Sherman.

This report is just a glimpse into the exciting activities of the American Jewish Congress during the past year. We are proud of our accomplishments and have no hesitation in saying that we expect 2009 to be a no less productive year.

We hope this overview demonstrates the unique contributions AJCongress has made in the past year in the fashioning of public policy and in effectively representing the American Jewish community. Much of this work will carry us into 2009. Our battle for freedom of speech in the face of efforts to ban defamation of religion will become more intense as the Durban Review Conference (Durban II) approaches. We are already working on lobbying Congress and state legislatures to enact anti-libel tourism laws during upcoming legislative sessions. Of course, we will continue our efforts to enhance Israel’s relations with NATO, and to grapple with the problem of human shields. Finding alternative sources of energy, reducing dependence on foreign oil and funding the U.S.-Israel Energy Independence program will remain priorities.

No doubt we will also face—as we have for 90 years now—challenges no one can foresee today. With your help, we will be ready. Your generous past support has allowed us to remain a vital force in Jewish life and beyond, and it is deeply appreciated. What we will be able to accomplish in 2009 also depends on you. Together, we will meet the challenges that lie ahead. To see how you can become a part of our efforts, visit our website, at: www.ajcongress.org