

*WASHINGTON, DC (October 27, 2009) – Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-IL, participated in a panel discussion titled, "The View from the Hill: Congress and the U.S. - Israel Relationship" at J Streets' first national conference.*

*Her opening remarks are below:*

Thank you for inviting me to participate in J Street's first national conference. I am always proud to join my many friends here today – what a great turnout -- who are dedicated, as I am, to a peaceful and secure future for the State of Israel – the Jewish State of Israel.

From the earliest minutes of her founding, the United State has supported Israel, and Israel in turn has been a reliable friend and the closest of allies in a dangerous but vital region of the world. A strong Israel is a matter of U.S. national interest as is an enduring peace in the region.

As a member of Congress and a Jew, it has been gratifying to me that U.S. Congressional support for Israel has been strongly bi-partisan, actually nearly universal, even when our politics has been fraught with partisan tensions. Financial assistance to Israel has always been widely supported. Joint strategic, economic and scientific endeavors that benefit both the United States and Israel are routinely enacted without controversy.

Still, after 61 years, Israelis live in a state of perpetual danger with only intermittent respite from deadly conflict. And so, as Israel's best friend in the world, it is quite natural that we would be debating how best to most effectively to work toward long-term security. I believe that means actively working to achieve a negotiated two-state solution with the Palestinians. While no third party can execute such an agreement, it is clear that the United States can and must play a role if it is to happen.

In addition, long term security means working with Israel and other countries in the region to avert a nuclear arms race and to bring about a peaceful resolution caused by Iran's nuclear program.

I want to let you know that I am a cosponsor of two Iran-related bills in the House. I'm a cosponsor of H.R. 1327, Rep. Barney Frank's bill allowing state and local governments to divest from companies heavily invested in Iran's energy sector, which passed the House on 10/14 by a vote of 414-6. I'm also a cosponsor of H.R. 2194, Rep. Berman's Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act, which is scheduled to be marked up on Wednesday.

These goals are not easy to achieve. The obstacles to peace have been festering for a very long time. But it is also clear that perpetual war is not the answer. President Obama, who enjoyed wide support for his election among American Jews, 79% of the Jewish vote, views this as a top international priority and has appointed George Mitchell as a Special Envoy to the region. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has long been a trusted friend of Israel as well.

The Administration and many of us feel a sense of urgency about the situation -- that delay in

working toward a peaceful, long term solution only makes matters worse. I am hopeful that the debate on just what to do can be conducted within the Jewish community and within our country in a manner that acknowledges that differences of opinion do not reflect a difference of commitment to Israel.

Being united in support of Israel should not preclude a vigorous debate about which particular strategy or tactic to adopt. We are having such a debate right now on Afghanistan among people who firmly support the goals of a stable, self-sufficient and more democratic country -- more troops, less troops, a civilian surge etc.

And so I welcome the opportunity to participate in this discussion here today or anywhere that friends of Israel gather to explore the opportunities for peace and the obstacles that stand in the way.