

Rep. Schakowsky saw Israel at a critical time

3/3/2011

As legislators returned to their districts and took to the road during the recent Congressional recess, Rep. Jan Schakowsky (IL-9th District) visited Israel on an educational tour organized and sponsored by the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago.

Schakowsky was accompanied on the Feb. 23-28 trip by her District Director Leslie Combs and joined by David Brown, chair of JUF's Overall Planning and Allocations Committee; JUF constituent David Golder; and JUF Executive Vice President Michael Kotzin.

"The four days we spent on the ground in Israel (which were as full as a busy week) allowed us to get a sense of the various Israeli views of and concerns about the changes taking place in the region at this critical time," Schakowsky said. "I drove an electric car developed by Shai Agassi's Better Place and learned about the influx of Sudanese to Israel coming through Sinai."

"It was quite a time to be in Israel," Kotzin said. "From government officials to opposition members of the Knesset, from think tank and academic experts and media commentators to 'ordinary' Israelis, there was consensus that, as uncertain as the outcomes might be, the Middle East currently finds itself in a moment of dramatic change and uncertainty."

"While the Egyptian activists were admired and applauded for their courage and readiness to stand up against their authoritarian rulers in the name of freedom, there was also widespread anxiety and concern regarding the direction that governmental and societal changes might go and the impact on the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan," Kotzin continued.

As the trip was taking place, Schakowsky issued a "Dear Colleague" letter in support of the

Administration's efforts to prevent reductions in foreign aid that advance U.S. interests in the Middle East, to forestall efforts to separate aid to Israel from other assistance, and to work with the parties and other regional actors toward a two-state resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"Amidst a rising tide of historic events in the Middle East, we must ensure that American policy in the region promotes democracy, more open societies, strong economies and lasting security – all of which are essential to the long-term interests of the United States, Israel, and the people of the region," the letter states.

America's role in the evolving Middle East and the leveraging effect that U.S. assistance to the Egyptians and to the Palestinian Authority might have on the developments on Egypt on the one hand, and on the peace process with the Palestinians on the other, constituted a frequent theme of discussions with the group, Kotzin said.

The current global assault on Israel's legitimacy was another focus of discussion during the many meetings in which Congresswoman Schakowsky participated. She also had an opportunity to learn about Israeli developments connected with her service on the House Select Committee on Intelligence and on the Energy and Commerce Committee.

"I participated in vibrant discussions, all rooted in love for Israel yet representing different points of view -- debates that for now can safely happen only in Israel by law and custom in the region," Schakowsky said. "I returned home more committed than ever, as a progressive who sometimes disagrees with Israeli policies or actions, to fight back against efforts to delegitimize Israel are taking place in our own backyard. Once again, I left Israel filled with pride as a Jew and hope for a lasting peace."