

CONGRESSMAN STEVE ISRAEL VISIT TO ISRAEL AUGUST 2014



REPORT TO MY CONSTITUENTS



Printed in House

Dear Neighbor:

From August 3-9, I participated in the very first bipartisan group of U.S. elected officials to visit Israel since the eruption of violence in Gaza.

From the first day when I arrived to an air-raid siren and rocket interception in Tel Aviv...to my last full day when Hamas launched rockets only seconds after a cease-fire expired, it was clear what Israel has to do to battle terrorists. It was also clear what the United States has to do to lead the fight against the double-standard the world places on Israel.

In Congress, I have led that fight. In mid-July, the House unanimously passed a resolution I introduced with Republican Congressman Tom Cole from Oklahoma, expressing support for the State of Israel's right to defend itself against unprovoked rocket attacks from Hamas. The resolution passed with more than 160 bipartisan cosponsors. Later in July, I led 105 of my colleagues in a bipartisan letter to the United Nations to condemn Hamas' use of civilians as human shields, which is a horrific violation of international law.

My trip validated the importance of these steps.

I arrived just shy of a month since the Israeli Defense Forces commenced Operation Protective Edge, but this story actually begins on a prior trip to Israel - exactly nine years ago.

In August 2005, I stood on the border of Gaza, and observed Israeli forces begin implementation of the Disengagement Plan to withdraw Israeli citizens and dismantle settlements in Gaza. Israel decided to leave unconditionally and unilaterally. Palestinian leaders had an opportunity to govern, build a state, provide for their people, and live in peace. I believed then what I'm certain many others did: this was a test of whether those who controlled Gaza could maintain peace with Israel.

Nine years later, on this trip, the question was answered. Vividly.

Here are various reflections from a journal I wrote during the trip. I am deeply interested in your views as well. Please call Harrison Feuer at (516) 304-5651 or (631) 777-7391 or (718) 875-1675 to receive regular updates on my work to further strengthen the critical U.S. – Israel alliance.



Congressman Steve Israel participated in the very first delegation of U.S. elected officials to visit Israel since the eruption in Gaza.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve Israel". The signature is stylized and cursive.

STEVE ISRAEL
Member of Congress

PROLOGUE

In August 2005, Israel commenced its Disengagement Plan and unconditionally left Gaza. Nearly five months later in January 2006, Hamas won elections, leading in a new divide: Fatah ruled the West Bank and Hamas controlled Gaza. Beachfront properties become staging grounds for incitement and terror.

Fast forward to June 2014: Hamas is isolated and at its weakest point. It has lost Syria as a base and patron. Qatar and Turkey are its last reliable allies. It hasn't paid its staff. It is desperate for relevance.

In June, three Israeli teens were kidnapped and killed in the West Bank. Israel investigates and conducts a roundup of suspects. Shortly thereafter a Palestinian teenager was kidnapped and murdered and clashes erupt in the West Bank. While Israel finds and arrests those responsible for the murder of the Palestinian teenager, Hamas celebrates the murders of the Jewish teens. Then it intensifies its rocket fire at Israeli civilians. After several days of restraint, Israel launches Operation Protective Edge to restore calm.

Soon, the nature of the conflict changes after 13 Hamas terrorists infiltrate Israel via a tunnel dug from Gaza. Israel finds a vast infrastructure of terror tunnels extending within its borders. It begins a limited ground operation into Gaza to search for and destroy this infrastructure.

Meanwhile, rockets continue to be fired at Israel.

"I HOPE YOU'RE OKAY" SUNDAY, AUGUST 3, TEL AVIV & JERUSALEM

We arrive at Ben-Gurion Airport in what appears to be a completely normal climate. Israelis crowd the terminal to greet passengers with welcome-home signs and balloons. There are no signs that thousands of rockets have been fired on Israel since June; or that only 12 days prior, a missile landed approximately one mile away, prompting the Federal Aviation Administration to temporarily ban U.S. airlines from flying to or from Ben-Gurion Airport.

Only a few minutes later, the normalcy is broken by an email from a friend living in Tel Aviv:



Arrival at Ben-Gurion Airport

"We just had a siren and interception in Tel Aviv. Hope you're okay."

Later we arrive in Jerusalem to what seems unusually quiet. The next day, we walk through the Old City's Arab Quarter. Usually the narrow streets can barely contain the surge of crowds. Today it is disturbingly empty as merchants sit in front of their shops, staring vacantly. Our

guide noted during our visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, that he usually has to use his elbows to get through the crowds and had never seen it this empty before.

In a sense, this is the hidden casualty of war. Not just damage to human lives, but to economic life on all sides.

"PHANTOM SOUNDS" SUNDAY NIGHT, AUGUST 3, JERUSALEM



*Congressman Steve Israel and
Ambassador Ron Dermer.*

Two weeks prior to this trip, I had dinner with **Israel's Ambassador to the U.S., Ron Dermer**. I asked him then what was the most surprising aspect of Hamas' capabilities in Gaza. His immediate response was the number and sophistication of terror tunnels. As Israel commenced Operation Protective Edge, they discovered a vast labyrinth of tunnels leading penetrating their borders. Terrorists dig up to the last three or four feet so their locations cannot be detected. They infiltrate Israel armed with weapons, tranquilizers and plastic hand ties. Their mission is to kill or kidnap Israeli soldiers or civilians. The extent of this capability required Israel to deploy

ground troops inside Gaza and they detected and destroyed over 30 terror tunnels. But the price was heavy – over 60 Israeli soldiers lost their lives.

In a meeting, **David Horovitz**, the editor of *The Times of Israel*, shares his unique perspective. For years Israeli families living near the border of Gaza reported difficulty sleeping at night because they heard the sounds of "phantom digging" under their homes. The assumption was that they were experiencing some type of trauma after repeated exposure to Hamas attacks. Now we know it wasn't a stress disorder. What they heard was real: Terrorists digging tunnels under their children's bedrooms.

CEASE-FIRE TUESDAY, AUGUST 5, JERUSALEM

We awake in Jerusalem. Between 7:55 and 8:00 am this morning, Hamas launches a barrage of 25 rockets at Israel. Then, quiet. A 72-hour cease fire has been announced. I detect a collective holding of breaths by Israelis. Hope tempered by the reality that every cease fire up to now has been rejected or violated by one side - Hamas.

“THE SYSTEM HAS FAILED.” TUESDAY, AUGUST 5, JERUSALEM

When **Salam Fayyad** was appointed Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority in 2007, hopes were high that he would impose good governance, transparency and economic opportunity. In fact, he won international and Israeli approval for his management of the West Bank. He left – or was forced from – his position in 2013.



Congressman Steve Israel and former Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.

We meet at the American Colony Hotel, a place of legendary intrigue. Where Lawrence of Arabia stayed, John LaCarre wrote, and clandestine conversations have been whispered over generations. I walk into the lobby, scanning for the former Prime Minister and his entourage. A mild gray-haired man dressed in a blue blazer and checkered shirt approaches, extends his hand and says, “Hello, I am Salam Fayyad.” He is alone—no entourage accompanies him these days.

We sit at a conference table, drinking dark coffee and nibbling on cookies. In an economist’s dispassionate tone, he analyzes the need for infrastructure, economic development, and nation building for his people. More than anything, he emphasizes that Palestinian leadership must demonstrate an ability to govern effectively; to offer institutions that provide adequate services for their people. This has become a conundrum in the West Bank and Gaza. Hamas, whose charter calls for the extermination of Israel, has developed a reputation for providing for its people. Meanwhile, Fatah, which has renounced a platform of violence against Israel, struggles. Any short or long term assistance to the people of Gaza cannot fortify this perception.

I am reminded of the U.S. decision to promote elections in the West Bank and Gaza – including Hamas - in January 2006 over the protests of Israel and Fatah. The election resulted in the empowerment of Hamas, then its takeover of Gaza. Since then, there’s been arguably no improvement in the lives of Palestinians in Gaza. Instead there’s more poverty, misery, and injustice.

THE LAWS OF WAR WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 6, JERUSALEM

Even as Israel confronts assaults from rockets and tunnels from Gaza, it faces a different barrage from abroad. Anti-Israel protests and rallies have swept through Europe. Jewish institutions have been attacked. Nations that protect their citizens by all means necessary suddenly find it necessary to rush to condemn Israel for “disproportionality” and “war crimes.” The whole planet seems to rotate on a double standard.

Col. Eli Bar-On is Deputy Military Advocate General in the IDF. His job is to ensure that Israel’s military actions are consistent with international law and Israel’s own humanitarian values. This becomes increasingly difficult against an enemy that hides underground while

forcing civilians above ground; that embeds its weapons in schools, mosques, hospitals and homes; that views its own citizens as collateral damage in a global propaganda war.

Military operations are often prohibited when collateral damage outweighs military objective. Ammunition is used to reduce civilian casualties. Advance warning to civilians includes leaflets, phone calls, texts, and low munition weapons that knock on a roof to alert anyone still inside to an imminent strike.

This is not to say that catastrophic and tragic mistakes are not made. Americans know full well that no war is mistake-free. Sometimes it is faulty intelligence. Sometimes a wrong decision. Tragic errors breed well in the fog of war.

The difference between Israel and Hamas, however is clear: when an Israeli strike hits a civilian, it is viewed as a horrific mistake that must be investigated and corrected. When a Hamas rocket hits Israeli civilians, it is viewed as a major success that must be celebrated.

“JOHN KERRY IS CALLING.” WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 6, JERUSALEM

Even in a cauldron of pressure, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spends nearly an hour with us. Our meeting finally ends when an aide slips him a piece of paper. The Prime Minister reads it and says: “John Kerry is calling.”

Netanyahu begins the meeting by noting that had Hamas accepted the first cease fire proposal in the opening days of conflict, total casualties would have been around 200.

For most of the hour Netanyahu shares his concern about various United Nations attempts to single out unfairly and incorrectly Israel.



*Rep. Israel meets with
Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu*

His concerns are well founded. These efforts would deny Israel’s right to legitimate self-defense against ruthless enemies that fire weapons from among citizens. They would deprive Israel of the right to defend itself and therefore deprive Israel of its right to exist.

And, ultimately they would be applied against our efforts to defend our citizens from terrorists. I decide to commit myself to work against such efforts.

“JUST THE WIND”

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 6, TEL AVIV

I race to a CNN studio for an interview with Jake Tapper. Then to a dinner with four Israeli entrepreneurs on the topic of innovation. Israeli salads clutter the table as we watch PowerPoints on new technologies (PowerPoint slides and jet lag don't usually mix well). Suddenly, a panelist stops and asks – “Was that an air-raid?” Another panelist answers that it is just the wind.

Immediately I think back to when my two daughters were young, and I put them to bed. If they heard something that frightened them, I would comfort them by saying, “it's just the wind.”

Today, in Israel, an entire population must question whether the sound they heard is a gust of wind or the wail of an air-raid siren.

IRON DOME

THURSDAY AUGUST 7, TEL AVIV

Hamas has fired over 4,300 rockets at Israel. Over half the population of Israel is in range. (If you include missiles from southern Lebanon, over 80 percent of Israel's population is within range of air attack).

The night before we departed for Israel, Congress overwhelmingly passed \$225 million in funding for Israel's Iron Dome system. Only 8 Members voted against: 4 Republicans and 4 Democrats.

Here's how Iron Dome works: a radar covers all of Gaza. When a rocket is launched, it computes the speed, arc, trajectory, and impact. If the system projects that the rocket will land harmlessly in an open area, there is no interception. (At a cost of \$100k per missile, this may be the most frugal missile defense system ever). However, if the missile is headed towards a populated area, interceptors are launched.

An engineer involved in the program explains the technology in basic terms I can appreciate: baseball: A batter hits a long fly ball to right field. Even as the ball comes off the bat, the right fielder starts to position himself. He is calculating angle, speed, and arc. He meets the ball. Takes it out of play.

I'm thinking my beloved Mets should trade its entire outfield for a few Iron Dome batteries.

About 90 percent of rockets targeted on civilian population centers have been destroyed. According to Omar Bar Lev, a Member of Knesset representing the Labor Party, over 1,000 lives have been saved. And a far more deadly ground war for both sides has been avoided.

Still, Iron Dome isn't sufficient against a panoramic threat of offensive missiles with different ranges; and particularly against Iran's rapid advancement of next generation missiles. Additional

defensive systems include:

- David's Sling, which will defend against medium/long range rockets with ranges of 25-180 miles. Co-produced with the U.S., it could become operational around 2016.
- Arrow 2, now operational, and capable of intercepting the missile threats from Syria and Iran.
- Arrow 3, currently in development with the U.S. will provide an upper tier exo-atmospheric defense against ICBM and other long range ballistic missiles from Iran.

"BOMB OR BOMBING."

THURSDAY, AUGUST 7, TEL AVIV

If you want to grasp how quickly the nature of threat changes in Israel, have breakfast with **Major General Amos Yadlin**, the immediate past head of the IDF Intelligence Branch.

The General discusses the constant reshuffling of strategic threats against Israel: Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria. But the number one potential military threat remains Iran. According to published estimates, Iran has 10,000 centrifuges currently spinning with 9,000 in reserve. Some believe that Iran is three to four months from a breakout capability (not including delivery systems).

The General outlines strategies to slow or stop this capability.

- 1- Continued engagement with the international community.
- 2- Sanctions, which have impacted Iran.
- 3- Covert, clandestine and cyber capabilities, which most analysts believe have significantly reduced Iran's centrifuge program.
- 4- A military response.
- 5- Regime change

I share with him my growing concerns about Iran's ballistic missile program. Its current Shahaab 3 has a range of 800 miles and its variant version can reach 1,200 miles. Recently I received a classified briefing on Iranian efforts to develop ICBM's – a threat to the United States.

Yadlin finishes with a troubling timetable: Israel will reach a junction within a year: a nuclear capable Iran or a military response to prevent that capability. In other words: "bomb or bombing."

THE AMBASSADOR THURSDAY, AUGUST 7, TEL AVIV

We meet with U.S. Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro who has a firsthand understanding of Hamas rocket attacks. During this conflict, the US Embassy staff has been forced into shelters.

I have had well-stated differences with key elements of the Administration's approach towards the Middle East (just as I did with the Bush Administration). I reiterate that the Administration must fight against the double standard the world places on Israel, including the UN commission of inquiry and a possible International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation against Israel.

The Ambassador reiterates that the Administration will oppose ICC investigations; and seek continued cooperation on Israel's ballistic missile defense requirements.



Congressman Steve Israel with AIPAC President Bob Cohen (on right) and U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Dan Shapiro.

THE STATESMAN THURSDAY, AUGUST 7, TEL AVIV-JAFFA



Congressman Steve Israel with former Israeli President Shimon Peres

If there is a Gandhi left on earth, he is **Shimon Peres**. We have met many times; and on each occasion, I am awed by his vision for peace, which has not been blurred by the passage of time or the realities of conflict.

Peres left Israel's presidency only recently. Now we sit in a conference room at the **Peres Center for Peace**. To hear Peres, you must lean forward. At which point you can't escape the power of his words. He shares a vision that addresses the roots of terror: religious indoctrination, education that fuels hatred, poverty, unemployment, economics, among others.

“NO QUESTIONS ASKED.” THURSDAY, AUGUST 7, TZFAT

The Ziv Medical Center in Tzfat resembles any other modern hospital. A complex of contemporary buildings, large signs directing traffic to the ER, ambulances parked nearby. Except that it is located only a few miles from the Syrian border and has treated over 300 Syrians with serious wounds from the civil war.

Prof. Oscar Embon explains that injured Syrians approach the border and show that they have no weapons. They are not asked whose side of the civil war they are on. If an injury needs medical attention, the Israeli Army brings them across the border to a nearby field hospital. If further or advanced intervention is required, they are taken by ambulance to Ziv Medical Center or other regional hospitals in Northern Israel. Following surgery and care, they are returned to the border. All signs of their time in Israel are erased. They return with medical records in Arabic and clothing that cannot be traced back to Israel. The cost to the hospital is \$4 million. The care is free. Syria remains an enemy of Israel. Israel is saving the lives of Syrians while the world accuses Israel of war crimes.

Our next stop is an overlook at the Syrian border, only a half mile away. On one side, a green grove of trees in Israel, on the other a crumbling Syrian ghost town. We hear a sudden explosion, and a plume of white smoke rises towards a clear sky. Then, more explosions, followed by coils of smoke spreading across the horizon. Rebel forces are shelling Syrian government positions. The Syrian civil war is raging immediately in front of us; within three miles of Israel. About 175,000 Syrians have been killed in this conflict, to the silence of much of the international community. Where is that outrage? It is submerged under a sea of hypocrisy.

THE CEASE FIRE BEFORE THE NEXT CEASE FIRE FRIDAY, AUGUST 8, NORTHERN ISRAEL

We are in northern Israel on a cool morning. In one direction we can see Syria. In the other is Lebanon. I am fixed on my watch as it is just before 8:00 am, when the 72-hour cease fire is scheduled to expire. Sure enough, by 8:05, the first volley of rockets are fired from Gaza at Israel. One is intercepted by Iron Dome over Ashkelon; the others fall to open ground. Once again, Hamas chooses violence over quiet. Like clockwork.

We are back to where we were. Another cease fire, another rocket. As one speaker told us: “Every cease fire is the one before the next cease fire.”

When it will end no one knows. How it must end is easier to assess:

- First - a permanent termination of attacks on Israel – above ground and underground.
- Second - prohibiting the rearming of Hamas while seeking long term demilitarization of Gaza.
- Third - humanitarian assistance and reconstruction of Gaza without assisting Hamas and its

rearmament.

Each of these goals must demonstrate clearly that violence does not achieve results. The delivery of humanitarian goods or reconstruction cannot be credited to Hamas. Hamas cannot lose a war only to win the hearts and minds of the civilians it exploited. There must be transparent, verifiable mechanisms to ensure nothing is diverted to terrorists.

Sadly, I am skeptical, at least in the near term. I reflect on my meeting with Shimon Peres, who spoke so eloquently about education. I believe peace will only come when schools in Gaza and elsewhere begin teaching children how to put things together rather than blow things up. True peace, lasting peace, starts not at negotiating tables, but in Arab classrooms. It may be a generation away. Which means we need to start now.

EPILOGUE

“BLOOD ON YOUR HANDS”

HUNTINGTON, NEW YORK

The deepest lessons I learned during my visit were the shocking disconnect and the viral bias that much of the world and the media has against Israel.

I saw it first-hand. Literally, in my hand as I read a flood of angry responses to every tweet I sent during the visit. Calling me a traitor. Demanding that I run for a seat in the Knesset. Accusing me of having “the blood of children on your hands.”

In our community, we often take for granted support for Israel. In fact, even in our country, and especially around the world, there is a rising and frothing tide of hatred. We must organize against this double standard and hypocrisy. We must tell the truth.

As I write this in Huntington, I hear the distant siren from my local fire department. For us, the sound is almost meaningless. Even normal. I think back to that night in Tel Aviv, when the entrepreneur stopped suddenly and wondered aloud if he had heard the wind or an air raid siren.

For as long as Israelis must distinguish between the wind and the wail of a siren, my support for Israel will be unabashed and unequivocal. And defiant.



Congressman Steve Israel was honored to represent his colleagues at a wreath-laying ceremony at Yad Vashem.