



ISRAEL MATTERS!

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US House Votes To Raise Security Ties With Israel

Israel Cancels Election, Coalition Formed

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called off early elections recently after reaching an agreement to bring the main opposition party into the government, a move that puts a more moderate face on his hawkish coalition.

The deal to include the centrist Kadima Party, announced just a day after Netanyahu set early elections in motion, could have implications for a possible Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear facilities and help Netanyahu fend off challenges over an array of issues from partners in his current coalition.

President Shimon Peres' office confirmed media reports that Netanyahu had struck an agreement with Kadima, parliament's largest party. Netanyahu's current governing coalition has been dominated by religious and nationalist partners that failed to seriously engage the Palestinians.

With Kadima in the government, Netanyahu could have broader backing to make concessions to the Palestinians and face added pressure to show restraint on Iran. Kadima agreed to join Netanyahu's government on condition it supports scrapping widespread exemptions for ultra-Orthodox Jews

Israel's Labor Party called the deal "ridiculous" and said it would remain in the opposition. [NPR]

The US House of Representatives on May 9th overwhelmingly passed bipartisan legislation that reaffirms and enhances US policy commitments to Israel's security. The United States-Israel Enhanced Security Cooperation Act of 2012, which was sponsored by House Majority Leader Rep. Eric Cantor (R-Va.) and House Minority Whip Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), passed by a vote of 411-2. The two members that voted against the legislation were Reps. Ron Paul (R-Texas) and John Dingell (D-Mich.). Also, nine members of the House voted "present" on the legislation.

In addition to expanding military cooperation between the two countries, the legislation states that it will be US policy to provide Israel with essential military capabilities to preserve its qualitative military edge in the region. Some provisions appear aimed at assisting Israel particularly in a possible confrontation with Iran. The legislation recommends that the United States provide Israel with "air refueling tankers, missile defense capabilities, and specialized munitions." Israel has sought an air-refueling capacity as a means to cover the distance to Iran in the case of a strike. "Specialized munitions" could include bunker busting bombs that could reach redoubts where Iran is suspected of building a nuclear weapon capability.

During floor debate, Cantor and Hoyer spoke out about the importance of this legislation to boost the US-Israel strategic relationship. "This bill re-affirms Israel's right to defend itself against threats and puts Congress on the record about America's long-standing commitment to the US-Israel strategic relationship, a unique and special relationship founded on shared interests and shared democratic values," Cantor said during his floor remarks. "This bill recognizes the profound threats the US and Israel face in the region and reiterates our commitment to standing side by side with Israel during this pivotal and dangerous period of transition and instability."

Hoyer stated that the legislation was vital to increasing cooperation between the two countries so they "can further deter Iran from developing nuclear weapons capability and work together to combat terrorism that threatens both of our countries." "There needs to be a clear understanding by all those who would threaten Israel that the United States stands with her, because it is in our – the United States' – security interest to do so, and because it is morally and ethically the right thing to do as well," Hoyer said.

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), which lobbied for this legislation, released a statement applauding the bipartisan support for the legislation. "This vote is a testament to the broad, bipartisan support of the American people for bolstering the ties between the US and our ally Israel," the AIPAC statement said. [JPost]

Israel, PA Pledge Commitment to Peace After Ramallah Meeting

Israel and the Palestinian Authority pledged their commitment to peace, after Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's envoy Yitzhak Molcho travelled to Ramallah to deliver a letter on his behalf to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

A statement issued by the Prime Minister's Office after the meeting said, "Israel and the Palestinian Authority are committed to achieving peace and the sides hope that the exchange of letters between President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu will further this goal."

The letter from Netanyahu came in response to one which Abbas sent him last month in which he stated that talks would only be renewed when Israel froze construction in east Jerusalem and the settlements. The written exchange is the latest attempt to revive the frozen peace process. The two men have not met face to face since September.

Earlier in the day, Abbas received a phone call from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and discussed with her the latest developments in the region. A PA official said that Abbas urged the US administration to intervene with Israel to accept the demands of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners who have been on hunger strike for the past few weeks.

Abbas also met Saturday in Ramallah with a delegation from US-based Israel lobby group J Street and briefed it on the latest developments surrounding the stalled peace process. During the meeting Abbas reiterated his commitment to the peace process and the two-state solution. Abbas said that he would be prepared to return immediately to the negotiating table if the Israeli government accepted the two-state solution and agreed to freeze construction of new homes in the West Bank settlements and east Jerusalem, the PA official said.

J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami said that Abbas also spoke of the need for an upfront commitment from Israel that a final status agreement would be based on the 1967 line with agreed land swaps.

The meeting came toward the end of an eight-day J Street trip to the region, which included a stop in Jordan and a visit with its King Abdullah II. According to Ben-Ami, Abbas told the delegation that he is deeply committed to the two state solution and is looking for a diplomatic route forward. Ben-Ami said the impression he received from the trip is that the window of opportunity for a two-state solution is slipping away. "The time has come for action," he said.

Netanyahu has consistently called on Abbas to return to the negotiating table without preconditions.

[JPost]

Israel to Strengthen Security at Lebanese Border

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is building a new security wall along the Lebanese border in the Metula region. The wall, to be more than a kilometer long and a few meters high, is to prevent gunfire on the city from Lebanon.

Metula is one of the northernmost points in Israel, sitting just six kilometers from the Lebanese border. During the Second Lebanon War, Metula suffered from rocket and gun fire from Lebanon, resulting in the injury and deaths of residents.

The building of the wall is expected to last weeks, according to Israel Radio. Periodic IDF work along the border with Lebanon often raises tensions with Beirut. A reserve battalion commander was killed in 2010 and another soldier was seriously wounded when a Lebanese sniper shot at an IDF force conducting routine maintenance work along the border. [Israel Herald]

Israeli Breakthrough in the Fight Against Neurodegenerative Diseases

A patented breakthrough treatment for neurodegenerative diseases developed by Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU) researchers has secured more than \$1 million from Toucan Capital, a private U.S. biotech fund based in Baltimore, Maryland.

BGN Technologies, the University's tech transfer company, signed the research and licensing agreement with Toucan Capital, managed by Linda Powers, which holds a significant portfolio of stem-cell and regenerative medicine companies.

Professor Esther Priel, director of the School for Medical Laboratory Sciences at BGU, has developed chemical compounds that boost an enzyme, telomerase, which slows the progression of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, in laboratory mice. Priel, also of BGU's Shraga Segal Department of Microbiology and Immunology, showed that the compounds raise the levels of telomerase in human cells, stem cells and lab mice.

In Priel's new research study, which was published in the EMBO Molecular Medicine Journal, the research group shows that the compound can reach the brain and the spinal cord and increase the production of the protein enzyme telomerase.

"By injecting the compound into mice which are developing ALS, we can successfully delay the development of the disease and increase the lifespan of the mice," says Priel. "This is a scientific breakthrough since these compounds have great potential fighting neurodegenerative and other aging-related diseases." [BGU]