

A secure and stable Israel – our strongest ally in the Middle East -- is vital to America's security. The challenges we face in that region of the world are among the most important foreign policy issues before Congress today.

In April, I traveled to Iraq and Afghanistan to meet with the troops, assess operations, and gather information regarding the war. Earlier this month, I participated in a six-day congressional mission in Israel to explore the military, political, economic, and security issues confronting Israel and affecting its relationship with the United States.

Israel is a growing economic force and our longest and most important ally in the region. Since Israel's establishment as an independent state in 1948, the country has developed a close friendship with the United States based on common values. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11 we have worked together against common enemies. We can learn a lot from Israel's long battle against terrorism to protect our citizens.

Our trip included stops in Jerusalem, Ramallah, Tiberias, Jordan Valley, and the Negev Desert. We went on site surveys of Israel's border with Lebanon and Syria, the Southern border with the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights and Israel's northern border. We visited the sites holy to the Christian faith, the National Holocaust Museum, and Hadassah Medical Center.

During the mission, we met with top government and military leaders including: the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Foreign Affairs Minister Tzipi Livni, Defense Minister Ehud Barak, U.S. Ambassador Richard Jones, former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, State of Israel President Shimon Peres, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, and Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Dr. Salam Fayyad.

Among the topics we discussed were the threat posed by a nuclear Iran as it continues to defy the international community's demands to suspend uranium enrichment; foreign aid; the newly-reformed Palestinian Authority government and prospects for peace; and the expanded cooperation between the U.S. and Israel in fighting terrorism and proliferation.

Iran is a growing security threat to Israel and a destabilizing force in the region. Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad has called for Israel to be "wiped off the map". I have supported legislation to increase political and economic pressure— including sanctions-- to discourage Iran's efforts to achieve nuclear capacity and its on-going support for anti-Israeli groups.

U.S. foreign aid to Israel has long been considered a cost-effective way of ensuring that the nation can defend itself against regional threats. Israel and the United States have reached agreement on a ten-year military aid package for Israel. The funding would help ensure that the Jewish state maintains its military advantage over Iran, Syria and terrorist groups.

However, I have concerns about a recent proposal to sell arms Saudi Arabia and its neighbors to help counter Iran. Saudi Arabia has been inconsistent – at best – in its behavior toward terrorism.

Over the years, our joint military efforts with Israel have helped produce innovative technologies and security techniques that have helped protect American and Israeli lives, including the Arrow – a missile defense system that is currently deployed in Israel to intercept and destroy ballistic missiles.

During our visit, we also met with Israeli families -- including the fathers of abducted Israeli soldiers -- regarding their lives in a country where terrorists smuggle arms and conduct frequent bombings in their ongoing efforts to destroy the Jewish state. I was deeply moved by their love and passion for their country and I was humbled by their appreciation for the long-standing support they have received from the United States.

Israelis and Palestinians have fought for decades over the West Bank and Gaza Strip. There are renewed diplomatic efforts to implement a two-state solution to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by establishing a democratic Palestine to be created alongside Israel. However, questions remain whether an agreement can be reached and whether a moderate Palestinian president can enforce an agreement. In the meantime, the Israelis I met with said the Israeli West Bank barrier wall being built by Israel has helped to reduce suicide bombings.

Israel has a rich and important history; a diverse, modern, advanced and growing economy; and devoted citizens. Peace and security would ensure a bright future in Israel and is important to our national security in the United States. Congressional missions such as mine help broaden and deepen the bond between the two countries. I welcome your feedback on policies associated with Israel's security and America's interests abroad.

