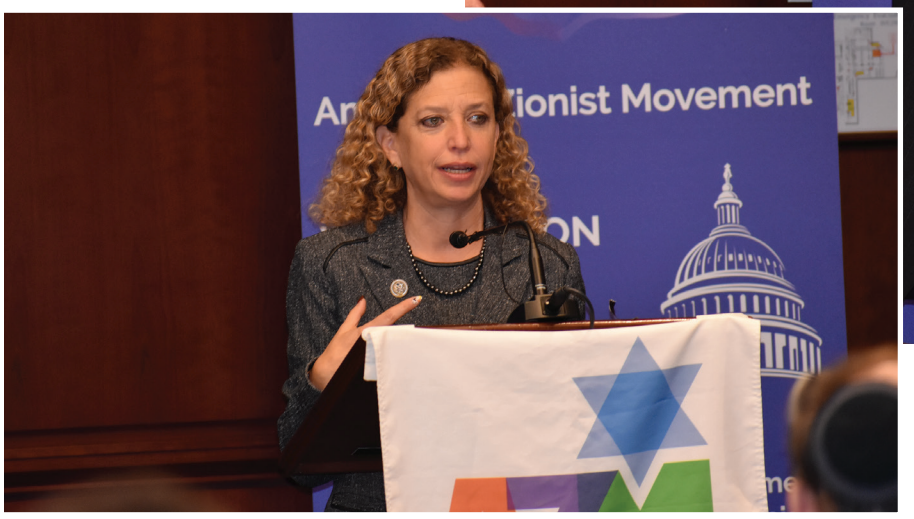
AZM Washington Forum highlights bipartisan support for Israel

By Jason Langsner

In today's hyper-partisan times it is rare to see near unanimity on any issue. But on Wednesday, Dec. 12, the American Zionist Movement's Washington Forum brought together officials from the White House, congressional Republicans and Democrats in an act of bipartisanship to showcase American political support for Israel.

"We gathered together in the Capitol after the midterm elections, and just prior to the new Congress, so our elected officials and community leaders could address how we can unite across party and political lines in support of Israel," said AZM President Richard D. Heideman. "Now more than ever there must be a renewal of the historic broad and bipartisan United States support for Israel."



Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.) told the forum that although the Jewish Diaspora is not monolitic, Israel should never be employed as a "political football."

Photo: Courtesy AZM

AZM is comprised of 29 national Jewish Zionist organizations. They work across a broad ideological, political and religious spectrum linking the American Jewish community together in support of Israel, Zionism and the Jewish people.

Featured congressional speakers at the forum included Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.); House Foreign Affairs Committee Ranking Member Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.); Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.), the former chair of the Democratic National Comittee; Reps. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) and Ted Deutch (D-Fla.), the chair and ranking member, respectively, for the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa at the House Foreign Affairs Committee; Rep. Josh Gottheimer (D-N.J.), co-chair of the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus; Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.), assistant majority whip and chairman of the Subcommittee on Readiness at the House Armed Services Committee; and Rep. Lee Zeldin (R-N.Y.), co-chair of the House Republican Israel Caucus.

Trump administration Mideast adviser Jason Greenblatt additionally provided an update on the administration's work trying to broker a lasting peace between Palestinian leadership and the Israeli government. In social media remarks following his presentation, he thanked AZM for their work "reminding folks that support for Israel should never be a partisan issue, but rather should unite us all!"

Schumer agreed with Greenblatt, believing that any friend of Israel from any party wouldn't want to turn Israel into a wedge issue.



Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.) was one of several Republicans to address the American Zionist Movement's Washington Forum last week on Capitol Hill.

Photo: Courtesy AZM

"The winds of political change blow fiercely," said Schumer. "Israel cannot be controlled by those whims."

Engel, the incoming chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said that the special allied relationship between the United States and Israel isn't a one-way street. "Israel needs America and that America needs Israel," he said.

Zeldin said that that "education needs to continue on Capitol Hill" in regard to supporting Israel in a bipartisan way.

Representatives from Jewish and pro-Israel communal groups from the left and right provided updates on their work and they highlighted how outliers that take actions to delegitimize Israel or that support policies that could put Israeli lives at risk are a minority in today's political ethos.

By way of offering an example, Halie Soifer, executive director of the Jewish Democratic Council of America, referenced how JDCA "called on Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) to lift his hold on legislation authorizing the U.S.-Israel Memorandum of Understanding, codifying the 10-year $38 billion commitment to U.S. military aid to Israel made by President Obama" and how the organization spoke out against Reps.-elect Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.), Ilhan Omar (D-Mich.) and Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.) when they expressed views on Israel that were counter to JDCA's policies or values on the Jewish state.

Soifer shared the stage with the Republican Jewish Coalition's Noah Silverman, the first time that JDCA and the RJC sat on the same panel, highlighting the event's bipartisan tenor.

Schultz said that she is not worried about a perceived slide of bipartisanship when it comes to supporting Israel. Still, "remaining united will not be easy, as forces on both sides will continue to divide us — as they have for thousands of years."

The Jewish Diaspora is not monolithic, she acknowledged, but people "cannot use Israel as a political football."

Dan Shapiro, the former U.S. ambassador to Israel in the Obama administration, said that "we are less divided than we appear." He referenced the previous administration's work negotiating the $38 billion Memorandum of Understanding and referenced U.S.-Israeli collaboration on Iron Dome anti-missile system.

Turning to the Iran nuclear deal that the previous White House negotiated but which is being dismantled by the current one, Shapiro said that both supporters and detractors of the deal are in full agreement that Iran should never have the capacity to get a nuclear weapon. The "division was on the means, not the ends" to achieve this goal, he said.

Perceived grievances by Israeli leaders in superseding then-President Obama to work directly with congressional Republicans are now a thing of the past, said Shapiro. He might have "many differences with the Trump administration, but none with Israel." ■