

Chairman Robert Wexler

Statement

Joint Europe Subcommittee and Middle East Subcommittee Hearing

“Strengthening the Europe-Israel Partnership”

July 9, 2008

The joint Europe and Middle East and South Asia subcommittees will come to order.

I want to thank the Chairman of the Middle East and South Asia Subcommittee Congressman Ackerman, Ranking Members Gallegly and Pence for agreeing to hold this joint subcommittee hearing on the growing relationship between Europe and Israel. I also want to express my deepest gratitude to our four witnesses for testifying.

Today’s hearing comes on the heels of Israel’s 60th anniversary of independence. Six decades ago it would have been unthinkable in Europe to envision a thriving Jewish State of over 7 million people that serves as a shining example of democracy, freedom and rule of law in a region rife with terrorism and instability.

It also would have been impossible to envision the Chancellor of Germany -- Angela Merkel speaking before the Israeli Knesset and only a few weeks later the President of France Nicholas Sarkozy addressing that same legislative body. Both Merkel and Sarkozy articulated unwavering support for Israel and its right to self defense as well as a desire to strengthen bilateral relations with Israel.

Over the past six decades European nations and institutions have played an integral role in Israel’s political, economic and security development. While the relationship has been tested at times and European public opinion too often appears too strikingly negative towards Israel; European-Israeli relations as well as European Union-Israeli relations have blossomed.

In fact, EU-Israeli governmental relations are at the strongest they have ever been. To that end, I want to congratulate both the EU and Israeli government for signing an agreement in Luxembourg on June 16 that will upgrade EU-Israeli relations in three areas: “increased diplomatic cooperation; Israel's participation in European plans and agencies; and an examination of possible Israeli integration into the European single market.”

The EU is now Israel’s largest trading partner, as well as its closest geographic democratic ally along with Turkey. The EU has been integral in efforts to thwart Iran’s nuclear weapons program, its soldiers make up the bulk of the peacekeepers in the UN mission stationed in Lebanon and the EU continues to monitor the Rafah crossing point at the Gaza/Egyptian border.

The EU has also stood shoulder to shoulder with the US in support of Israel’s right to self-defense and has firmly maintained its position of working with moderate Palestinians, while

isolating Hamas until it recognizes Israel, ends its support for terrorism and abides by past agreements signed between the Palestinian Authority and Israel.

Another issue of great importance to Europeans and Israelis, as well as to the US, is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) deepening partnership with Israel. This is a mutually beneficial relationship and I believe the US must take the lead in strengthening this partnership. Over the past two Congresses, I have worked closely with my colleagues in a bipartisan fashion to support enhanced NATO-Israeli relations. Last year, I joined with Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Congressmen Ackerman and Gallegly in introducing H. Res. 235 -- which expresses congressional support for closer NATO-Israeli relations and highlights the changing and existing security challenges facing the Transatlantic alliance, including combating terrorism and the importance of further NATO expansion.

Currently, Israel participates in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue and as part of the bilateral Istanbul Cooperation track. While the NATO-Israel partnership has been fruitful -- including participation in joint military operations, an Israeli Navy Liaison posted at NATO command in Naples, Italy, a NATO Public Diplomacy seminar held this past March at Ben-Gurion University in Israel -- it is my belief that NATO and Israeli bilateral relations should be significantly upgraded.

As it relates to key security issues impacting the United States, Europe and Israel I want to applaud the EU for imposing new sanctions on Iran that go beyond what the United Nations Security Council has mandated. Although I had hoped the strengthening of these sanctions would have happened sooner -- it is essential that EU member states fully implement these sanctions.

It is also essential that European countries, the EU and Israel work closely together to address terrorism whether it is carried out by Hamas, Hezbollah, PKK or Al Qaeda. In this vein, our European allies and the EU must hold Hezbollah accountable for its destabilization of Lebanon and continued terrorist activity. I applaud the decision by the British government this month to ban the military wing of Hezbollah and urge the EU and other European governments to follow Britain's lead.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about expanding European-Israeli relations as well as Israel's partnership with key European and Euro-Atlantic security institutions.

I will now turn to Chairman Ackerman for his opening remarks.