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Egypt, Iran Top Pols' Concerns At JCRC Event

Reason for optimism in post-Mubarak era, says Schumer, at congressional breakfast; Tehran nuclear ambitions worry N.Y. delegation.

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Adam Dickter

Assistant Managing Editor

The uncertain future of Israel's powerful neighbor dominated the speeches at Sunday's annual congressional breakfast sponsored by the Jewish Community Relations Council, held less than 48 hours after the demise of Hosni Mubarak's three-decade reign over Egypt.

The speakers included both of New York's senators and the majority of downstate New York's delegation to the House, and most were cautiously optimistic that extremist forces would not take hold as the country's military tries to assemble a new government.

"The Muslim Brotherhood is not al Qaeda," said Rep. Gary Ackerman, a Democrat who represents parts of Queens and Long Island. "But make no mistake about it, they are just as dedicated to the destruction of Israel. The good news is they are not as popular."

New York's senior senator, Charles Schumer, said that at this crossroads, the Egyptian people have two models from which to choose: Indonesia, where popular demonstrations led to the resignation of the president, Suharto, in 1998, and ushered in an era of political reform; and Iran, where the downfall of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1980 led to a tyrannical theocracy hostile to the West and Israel.



"Being Jewish, I worry," said Sen. Charles Schumer at the JCRC congressional breakfast Sunday, addressing the changing Middle Ea





“There is a reasonable path for a good outcome,” said Schumer. “The typical person on the street is not fundamentalist. They may not like Israel but it’s not at the top of their list.

“Iran is also a country where the people are rather secular [like Egypt]. A militant Egypt and Iran, the two biggest countries in the area, would be a disaster. Our government must do everything to guard against that.”

Indonesia, he said, “is basically democratic, basically secular, a possible model. In some sense [Egypt] is more likely to go down the path of Indonesia than Iran. But, being Jewish, I worry ... ”

Without speculating on its origin, Schumer expressed gratitude for the work of the so-called Stuxnet computer virus believed to have severely damaged Iran’s nuclear weapons program.

“Not only did it destroy centrifuges, but it appeared on the computer screens that everything was OK, so they didn’t even know for long periods of time the virus was spreading,” Schumer said. That damage, he said, creates some “breathing room” that together with sanctions could help weaken Iran’s regime while putting off its nuclear capability for at least two years.

The New York Times recently presented evidence that the virus originated in Israel, but the country’s leaders have not commented. Rep. Jerrold Nadler of Manhattan also mentioned Stuxnet, saying the cyber attack accomplished a result similar to a direct military attack but without bloodshed.

“If [Israel or the U.S. military] attack Iran the first thing that would happen is 40,000 missiles would be launched at Israel by Hezbollah,” said Nadler. “This virus delayed [Iran’s] nuclear ambition at least two or three years without any casualties in Israel or anywhere else. It’s a covert war.”

Nadler also mentioned “a pattern of Iran’s nuclear scientists falling off a cliff.”

New York’s junior senator, Kirsten Gillibrand, also a Democrat, said she would introduce a bipartisan bill this week to make it more difficult for U.S. companies to do business with Iran by requiring them to disclose any investments in Iran that are subject to U.S. sanctions in their quarterly and annual reports to the Securities and Exchange Commission. A provision in the bill would also require U.S. bans to report sanctionable activities by affiliated banks abroad. The bill is co-sponsored by Illinois Republican Sen. Mark Kirk and Reps. Ted Deutch, Democrat of Florida, and Dan Burton, Republican of Indiana, in the House.

Last year President Barack Obama signed a bill sponsored by Gillibrand and others that imposes penalties on companies that do business with Iran’s energy sector.

"Iran comprises an existential threat not just to Israel but to the U.S., too," said Gillibrand. "Sanctions clearly have had an effect. Gas prices [in Iran] have gone up, banks have shut down."

Gillibrand also called for "holding the UN more accountable" and said it should not participate in the Durban 3 World Conference Against Racism in New York in September. The prior conferences, she said, gave participants "a permission slip to be an anti-Semite" because of criticism against Israel that many decried as disproportionate to criticism of Arab countries.

Looking ahead to the Palestine Authority elections scheduled for July — called in reaction to the Egypt situation — Gillibrand said, "We have to make sure it doesn't become a platform for Hamas. There have to be calls for moderation, economic growth and direct negotiations [with Israel], no intermediaries."

Several speakers addressed the call for elimination of foreign aid emanating from some Republicans, including Tea Party activist freshman Rand Paul of Kentucky.

"We have to make sure Israel has the military edge over its neighbors," said Gillibrand. After his remarks, Schumer said he was also concerned about the anti-aid push. "If they can do it to other countries they can do it to Israel," Schumer said.

The only Republican official to attend the event, freshman Rep. Michael Grimm, said he sent a letter to the majority leadership saying he would vote against any bill reducing aid to Israel. "I have been named one of the co-chairs of the Republican Israel Caucus," said Grimm, whose district includes all of Staten Island and part of Brooklyn. "Although there is an R before my name, I stand firmly with the sovereign Jewish state of Israel."

In her remarks, Rep. Nita Lowey, a Westchester Democrat, said it was "absolutely essential" that the U.S. maintain military and economic aid to Egypt. "The relationship is too important. No one knows what's going to happen next." Citing former Republican President George W. Bush in a bipartisan gesture, Lowey said national security should be viewed in his terms of "defense, diplomacy and development."

But Rep. Anthony Weiner said he supported withholding any aid, especially military, to countries that are hostile to Israel or may have links to terrorism.

"Seventy percent of [Egypt's] aid is military, which is a mystery to me," said Weiner, a Democrat who represents parts of Brooklyn and Queens. "Who is their natural enemy there? We should start with Saudi Arabia; they shouldn't get a dime, a shekel, whatever until they start acting like an ally." He said al Qaeda ringleader Osama bin Laden "was paid by the Saudis to leave them alone."

Later in his speech, Weiner referred to the targeting of Iranian nuclear scientists — he didn't say by whom — and put his thumbs up. "I like it. I'm in favor of that."

Ackerman used the opportunity to reiterate an earlier denunciation of J Street, the Israel lobbying group that supports the Obama administration's approach to the peace process. Last month Ackerman, who was endorsed by J Street in his November re-election campaign, blasted the group for asking the president not to veto a UN resolution condemning Israeli settlement building.

"We often hear about the Arab street," Ackerman said. "There is also a Jewish street. It's a wide street, a highway. We must never lose sight of the fact that there is room for diversity, every

issue should be discussed, right lane, left lane, center lane ... But I will not partner with those people who delegitimize the state of Israel, who are going the wrong way on the highway.”

In the concluding remarks, Queens-based Rep. Gregory Meeks attacked what he said was a perception that African American elected officials, such as himself, were “wavering” on Israel support.

“It’s not true,” he said. “We are with you because it’s the right thing to do.”

He said the peaceful protests in Egypt reminded him of the marches against Jim Crow laws when he was a child in the ‘50s and ‘60s, and that just as Jews stood with black leaders during the civil rights struggle, “We will stand with you until we have changed the Middle East.”

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