

COVER STORY

L.A. Brings Its Clout to AIPAC

by HILLEL KUTTLER

David Yahudian endured embarrassment and fear growing up in Teheran. On walks in the market, his father ordered him to tuck the Magen David necklace inside his shirt and — even worse — called him by an alias, Ali, rather than by his overtly Jewish name. Following an Israel-Iran soccer match at the 1974 Asia Games, he saw fans burning Israeli flags in the parking lot.

Little in his native Iran has changed, said Yahudian, who was in Washington, D.C., on Monday. Last summer, the principal of a public high school summoned students to the courtyard for the anti-Israel commemoration known as Jerusalem Day. She taunted the school's lone Jew to demonstrate animosity toward Israel by dousing a proffered Israeli flag in kerosene and lighting it. Intimidated in public, the boy, Yahudian's 16-year-old nephew, Jacob, obeyed.

As much to exercise the freedoms he's enjoyed in the United States for the past 30 years as to support Israel, Yahudian closed his shop in L.A.'s Jewelry District to attend this week's annual American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) Policy Conference in Washington.

He was hardly alone. California reportedly brought 1,300 attendees, the largest delegation of any state. Southern Californians were noticeable throughout the corridors of the Walter E. Washington Convention Center. They came with large synagogue groups, campus organizations, Jewish outreach centers and on their own — although, even then, many in the last group brought along children, grandchildren and friends.

On Sunday, L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa delivered the keynote speech at a session where Rep. Jane Harman (D-Venice) and Rep. Dennis Cardoza (D-Merced) also spoke and where Milken Community High School senior Samson Schatz introduced the AIPAC board.

And, perhaps the best tribute of all: On Tuesday, traditionally the morning when attendees lobby their members of Congress, Capitol Hill instead came to the state group, with one forum at the convention center featuring Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein, followed by another with Reps. Harman, Brad Sherman (D-Sherman Oaks), Henry Waxman (D-Los Angeles) and Adam Schiff (D-Pasadena).

Indeed, a Monday morning session was titled, "Why L.A. Matters: The Intersections of Politics and Lobbying."

AIPAC spokesman Josh Block called the large, visible L.A. contingent "a real testament to the strength and diversity of the pro-Israel community — to not only have so many activists from Southern California, but also to have Mayor Villaraigosa give such a stirring address."

Hillel Kuttler is a freelance writer in Baltimore. He can be reached at hk@hillelthescrībcommunications.com.



L.A. delegation with Sen. David Vitter (R-La.). Photo by Michael Kovac

Attendees offered several explanations for the strong Los Angeles presence. Some felt a need to become activists against the threat of an imminently nuclear-capable Iran. Others pointed to the condemnation of the Israel Defense Forces' war last winter to halt Palestinian rocket fire from Gaza.

Even more lauded the recruitment efforts undertaken by rabbis representing a wide range of L.A. synagogues to bring people here. They spoke, too, of the role of synagogues' Israel committees and of individual congregants in encouraging friends and relatives to attend. Some mentioned a desire to gauge the possible effect on the America-Israel relationship of the recent ascensions to power of President Barack Obama and of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

All said that they'd come to learn, in-depth, about the array of Israel-related geo-political issues both in conference sessions and in informal discussions with fellow delegates.

Several participants said that coming to Washington helped equip them with the information and strategy needed to discuss the issues effectively back home. Schatz said he learned the importance of sticking with a uniform, pro-Israel message to jar supporters he knows who are apathetic and to respond to detractors.

For example, he said, "there should be no discussion" about the legitimacy of Iran's gaining a nuclear capability. For another: using what he called the "retail engagement" method of calmly debating topics one-on-one rather than responding publicly to provocative protestors. Schatz said he learned that method here and at two previous AIPAC seminars he's

attended in Washington over the past year.

No one mentioned the recession as a factor in spurring their own participation or in keeping potential delegates away.

"L.A. is such a large Jewish community that we *should* be bringing such a large delegation," Schatz said. "We have schools and leaders who are telling us to go, and we have the love for Israel. There's a great number of involved people. The [Israeli] consul general is very involved."

Large? How about the approximately 200 members of Sinai Temple, more than 100 each from Valley Beth Shalom and Stephen S. Wise Temple, and 40 each from Temple Beth Am and Shomrei Torah Synagogue in West Hills, which Yahudian attends?

The Jewish outreach group Aish L.A. brought 40 college students and young professionals here, the third straight year it has arranged a group.

Rabbi David Sorani, director of the graduate student division, said that Aish draws young people to Judaism by appealing to their interests and activities.

"When they get back from AIPAC, we try to get them involved in the Jewish community and Israel," Sorani explained before an Aish L.A. side meeting here Monday.

"It's been very successful because some students have gone to Israel rallies, gotten involved in other organizations and felt proud to be associated with Israel. Students will feel that they can stand up to the Palestinians and wear an Israeli T-shirt.... When you have 7,000 people here, it makes you feel supported by the community at large."

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Yoni Dror, an 11th-grader at Mesivta Birkat Yitzchak, mentioned his rabbi's custom, following Shacharit services, of informing students of overnight news from Israel, even updating the pre-election poll numbers.

Yoni believes he is the first from his school to attend the AIPAC conference. His father Brian, an accountant in the Fairfax District, also an AIPAC first-timer, said that he came, too, because an AIPAC speaker at Birkat Yitzchak had persuaded Yoni to travel to Washington.

No single issue on the pro-Israel agenda motivates Brian now: not the Iranian threat, terrorism or Hamas' role in Palestinian politics. "I don't think these issues are unique to Israel," he said. "Every one of the issues facing Israel's security is an issue facing, or that will face, the United States. I challenge anyone who feels that Iran or terrorism is a uniquely Israel problem to learn the facts and learn the issues."

Asked what he came to learn this week, Brian said, "It's the political change in both countries — trying to get a handle on what we can do to help." He added, "I feel that our time, effort and money are my contribution to ensuring Israel's safety. Thank God the state exists [and] has a good economy; the only thing left is to ensure its security."

Bringing young Angelenos to the AIPAC conference is an important way for Adam Milstein to support both Israel and Judaism. The Encino commercial real estate developer and his wife, Hila, natives of Haifa, assumed the cost of bringing 150 people here. That includes the Aish L.A. contingent along with groups from StandWithUs, Hillel, AIPAC's regional group and the Jewish Awareness Movement.

The investment "is a no-brainer," he said.

"I am a charitable person. My focus is the students. Now is the time to get them educated and involved. The kids are so energetic. They want to be active; they want to create.... I want them to bring their parents. [Parents] listen to the kids. Through the kids, we can reach more people," Milstein said.

Milstein also has partnered with AIPAC to reach out to non-Jewish college student leaders. Each year since 2006, the couple has sent 50 such students on AIPAC's Allied Campus Mission to Israel. "We're getting excellent results from our investment," he said. "As a businessman, every investment we make, we want to see the highest return. Every dollar we spend, we get huge results."

The Milsteins' involvement with AIPAC began modestly. They came to the conference five years ago because they wanted to spur college activism on Israel by their two elder daughters, Wendy and Leerone. Each girl brought a friend. At the 2004 conference's banquet, Leerone sat next to another Los Angeles participant. The two hit it off. They were married in 2006.

Yahudian, the jeweler, also has his teenage daughter, Hannah, in mind for AIPAC. He was so impressed by his initial experience here that he registered at a kiosk for next year's conference. He plans to bring his wife and daughter, too, and will raise the idea upon his return to Los Angeles.

Yahudian also is working on some Christian clients in Mississippi whom he knows from trade shows in New Orleans. Already, he said, a preacher there said that he hopes to bring 40 congregants on their first trip to Israel.

"I have to go home and promote [the conference] to family and friends, to see how many I can bring here," he said. "As I tell my friends: If you love Israel, this [event] is the perfect place to be." ●