

Op-Ed**Shareholders Must Insist Companies Divest from Iran**

By Mark Wallace

Washington (JTA) – Iran’s president recently announced that his nation has started to process highly enriched uranium and is now a “nuclear state.” This is a chilling reminder of the threat Iran poses.

The US government has ramped up its efforts to rein in Iran’s nuclear ambitions. In February, the Obama administration expanded sanctions against companies affiliated with Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged neighboring countries to up the pressure on Iranian elites.

But government action hasn’t stopped Iran’s nuclear pursuits. That’s why the private sector has a vital role to play. By severing economic ties with Iran, western companies can reinforce the international community’s efforts to stop Iran’s nuclear weapons program.

And by insisting the companies fully disclose their interests in Iran, investors can hold firms accountable for their dealings.

Lest we forget, Iran’s government provides financing and safe harbor to terrorists. It violently suppresses political dissent. In January, more than 1,000 protesters were arrested during demonstrations in Tehran and other major cities. At least eight were killed.

Iran would be emboldened and far more dangerous with nuclear weapons.

Foreign investment flowing into Iran lines the pockets of political elites who use the lucre to strengthen their grip on power and further the regime’s dangerous activities.

Despite these realities, multiple western companies conduct business in Iran. Such activity isn’t just morally suspect; it also could hurt shareholder value.

Investors should not stand by in the face of such risks. They should urge companies to change their behavior and give a full account of their exposure in Iran. To aid such efforts, United Against Nuclear Iran, a nonpartisan coalition dedi-

cated to preventing the Iranian regime from acquiring nuclear weapons, has launched the Iran Disclosure Project (IDP).

By law, publicly traded companies – not just American businesses, but also international firms that avail themselves of US capital markets – must disclose all “materials information” related to foreign investments in their annual reports to shareholders and in their annual filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission. The law stipulates that any investments that might affect firm performance are “material,” but the firms themselves are largely responsible for making that determination.

So companies effectively police themselves. Unsurprisingly, many are less than transparent about their involvement in Iran.

Eighteen states have taken steps to divest public pension funds from Iran. Other investors must follow their lead. They can start by demanding that firms accurately publicize their interests in Iran.

Such public pressure can prompt firms to act. In 2008, General Electric agreed to cease doing business in Iran. Just recently, both the German giant Siemens and the Italian energy company Eni committed to stop doing business in Iran once current contracts expire. In March, Shell announced it would halt all gasoline sales in Iran, and Ingersoll Rand said it would prohibit its foreign affiliates from selling products to Iran. Caterpillar, too, recently announced plans to sever ties with Iran.

Unfortunately, some companies are rebuffing calls for transparency. Other companies admit to doing business in Iran but claim they aren’t working with the government. That’s unlikely. The Revolutionary Guards are involved in virtually every sector of the economy, particularly those with substantial foreign interest, like oil, gas and engineering. Doing business in Iran is effectively impossible without doing busi-

ness with the Revolutionary Guards.

Private economic pressure is an important weapon in the global community’s drive to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. Trade sanctions already have left the country with sky-high inflation, unemployment and poverty. The Iranian people are deeply dissatisfied with their government. Choking off the stream of foreign dollars would weaken the regime and set the state for reform.

Sunlight is said to be the best disinfectant. Nowhere is that truer than in Iran.

We must have transparency with firms doing business in Iran. When confirmed with the choice of admitting to their profiteering in the world’s major state sponsor of terror or pulling out, responsible firms will pull out. Economic pressure on Iran may be our last hope for preventing the country from developing nuclear weapons. ☆

Mark Wallace is the president of United Against Nuclear Iran. Most recently, he was the US representative for UN Management and Reform.

World Union of Jewish Students Deepens Perception of Israel

By Mike Harvey, special to The Charlotte Jewish News

Growing up in Charlotte, I, like many other American Reform Jews, had a rather superficial view of Israel. Having visited the tourist attractions as an adolescent and taken several Jewish courses while an undergraduate student at Boston University, I automatically defended Israel’s politics and praised it as simply the most beautiful place in the world. But my immersion in Israel while on the Masa Israel Journey program, WUJS Jerusalem Learning made the country real to me and made my views on it more nuanced. As I look forward to becoming a Reform rabbi, I now feel able to bring a new level of insight and Jewish commitment to my community.

One of the requirements for Hebrew Union College’s Rabbinical School program is two-years of college level Hebrew. Not wanting to postpone graduate school, I opted to spend six months studying Hebrew in an immersive Ulpan in Israel. While living in Jerusalem during WUJS Jerusalem Learning, I not only had the opportunity to study Hebrew every day, but also to take courses in Torah, Kaballah, Talmud, Zionism, and the Arab-Israeli conflict in a pluralistic environment. These courses included weekly interactive field trips throughout Israel, one which led us to a beautiful tucked away café outside of Jerusalem where our lesson was to order our food and drinks completely in Hebrew.

The secret jewels on the WUJS program are the teachers: an incredible mix of young and old educators, some with decades of experience to share. Incorporating their Israel-related professional and personal histories, and expert-

ise into the lessons, they helped students understand new concepts and grasp intangible ideas. While the instructor of the Arab-Israeli conflict course spoke of his experiences as a former IDF intelligence officer, the rabbis could spout out any Torah or Talmudic verse in Hebrew and in English.

The teachers were not only mentors, but also friends. On long bus rides, I sat and spoke with my instructors about their lives and their journeys, and they answered and then asked about mine. The teachers at WUJS inspired me to become a better educator, to learn from their teaching styles and to grow in my appreciation for the State of Israel.

Without my experience on WUJS Jerusalem Learning, Rabbinical school could not be a consideration. Not only did my time in Israel provide me with a proficiency in and comfort with Hebrew, but I returned to the States feeling inspired and ready to lead a committed Jewish life. I purchased Kiddush cups, candles and challah covers and started wearing a kippah to display my pride in my Jewish identity. On Shabbat, I now host gatherings for my friends to discuss their week and unwind. Back in Charlotte, I am involved in Jewish young adult activities and synagogue programs in my area, and I currently teach religious school, advise a Jewish youth group and serve as a rabbinic intern.

My experience on WUJS Jerusalem Learning has helped shape me into the Jewish young adult I am becoming and envision the rabbi I hope to become. ☆

Mike Harvey will be entering his first year in Hebrew Union College in the fall of 2010.

Poll: Obama Struggling with Jews, But Not on Israel

By Ron Kampeas

Washington (JTA) -- A new survey shows President Obama struggling with American Jews -- but not on Israel-related matters.

The American Jewish Committee poll of US Jews found that Obama’s approval rating is at 57%, with 38% disapproving. That’s down from the stratospheric 79% approval rating among Jews that Obama enjoyed about a year ago, in May 2009. The AJC poll was conducted March 2-23 and surveyed 800 self-identifying Jewish respondents selected from a consumer mail panel.

Obama’s advantage among Jews vs. the rest of the population appears to be eroding. The latest Gallup polling shows Obama with a national approval rating of 48, nine points below the Jewish polling. Last May, general polling earned him a 63% approval, 16 points below the Jewish polling.

Despite the drop -- and weeks of tension with the Netanyahu government -- Obama still polls solidly on foreign policy, with a steady majority backing its US-Israel relations, according to the AJC poll.

It is on domestic issues that the president appears to be facing more unhappiness.

Jewish voters are statistically split on how Obama has handled health care reform, with 50% approving and 48% disapproving. On the economy he fares slightly better. Jewish voters who favor his policies stand at 55%, while 42% disapprove.

The last AJC poll on the views of American Jews, released last September, did not address domestic issues, so there’s no measure to assess any change in support on the specific issues of health and the economy. Indeed, this is the first poll in at least ten years in which the AJC has attempted to assess views on the

economy and health care. However, Jewish voters in solid majorities describe themselves as Democrats and as liberal to moderate in their views, and traditionally list the economy and health care as their two top concerns in the voting booth.

Matt Brooks, who directs the Republican Jewish Coalition, said the relatively low score on domestic issues underscored what he said was a steady decline in Democratic support among Jewish voters.

“This indicates a serious erosion of support,” he said. “It’s a huge drop. There’s no silver lining” for Democrats.

Ira Forman, the director of the National Democratic Jewish Council, countered that the poll did not account for Jewish voters who might be disappointed with Obama from a mere liberal perspective -- for instance, over his dropping from the reform bill the so-called public option, which would have allowed for government-run health care.

Additionally, much of the AJC polling took place before Obama’s come-from-behind victory on March 21, when the House passed health care reform, Forman said. Since then, Democrats have said they see a turnaround in the president’s political fortunes. “The narrative was the president was in the tank,” Forman said. “This was when it was thought his initiative was dead.”

Obama fares strongly with Jews on homeland security, with 62% approving and 33% disapproving -- a sign that Republican attempts to cast Obama as weak on protecting the nation have had little impact in the Jewish community.

He also scores 55% approval on how he handles US-Israel relations, which is virtually unchanged since last September, when his handling of the relation-

ship scored 54% approval. At that juncture, the tensions between Washington and Jerusalem were kept at a low bubble and were confined to US insistence on a total freeze of Israeli settlement, and the Netanyahu administration’s reluctance to concede.

The latest questions, however, coincided almost exactly with the period when US officials accused the Netanyahu government of “insulting” the US by announcing a new building start in eastern Jerusalem while VP Joe Biden was visiting, and when the president refused to make public gestures of friendship during Netanyahu’s subsequent visit to Washington.

A question on Obama’s handling of Iran’s nuclear capability showed a statistical dead heat on the approval side between last September -- 49% -- and now, 47%. However, disapproval rating rose moderately, apparently borrowing from the “uncertain” column: Back in September 35% disapproved; now 42% give a thumbs down.

The marks compared favorably, however, with Bush administration figures. Bush scored 33% approval rating on Iran in 2006, the most recent year that AJC asked that question.

Support for US and Israeli attacks on Iran to keep it from making a nuclear bomb appeared to drop slightly. Asked about a US strike, 53% said they would support one, and 42% were opposed, as opposed to 56% and 36% last September. On an Israeli strike, 62% supported and 33% opposed, as opposed to 66 and 28% in September.

The poll had a margin of error of plus/minus 3% points. Interviews were conducted by the firm Synovate, formerly Market Facts. ☆

Ron Kampeas is JTA’s Washington bureau chief.