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# The American Jewish Committee

European Office · 4, rue de la Bienfaisance, 75008 Paris · Tel. 522-9243 and 387-3839

NIVES E. FOX, European Representative

November 20, 1984

## MEMORANDUM

To: International Relations Department  
From: Nives Fox  
Subj: International Conference for the Freedom of Jews in Syria -  
Paris, November 18, 1984

The International Conference for the Freedom of Jews in Syria was a success, far beyond the most optimistic expectations. It was truly international, with the participation of representatives from 20 countries; it had a packed and overflowing audience through the entire day (well over 500 persons, almost double of the hoped for 300); it had many prestigious speakers and other personalities who came just to show solidarity; finally, there was a good press, radio and television coverage. SIONA could not have asked for more -- and the silent and avowed trepidations by the sponsoring organizations could not have been more assuaged.

And this in spite of the fact that French Senate President Alain Poher, around whom the entire conference was built, did not come after all. The official excuse given was that he had to be in Metz for an important commemoration; obviously a diplomatic ploy, and rumor has it that he was "persuaded" to stay away. Quite possible, and by those who believed his participation could harm President Mitterrand's forthcoming visit to Syria -- more important, because Poher is in the government opposition -- long-term relations with that country.

For the conference: There were very few remarks made of the kind we at AJC particularly feared, namely exaggeration about the plight of Syrian Jewry. Inevitably emotion or conviction carried a few speakers in this direction, but without excess; and the theme agreed to "let them go, each to the land of his choice," was adhered to, with the addition of repeated pleas to at least let out the 400 unmarried girls. In over seven hours of interventions -- and there were many more than just those listed on the agenda -- the sole and truly jarring note came from Rabbi Hecht (the rabbi of the Syrian community in New York) who not only described the situation overdramatically, but used words of contempt about Arabs (an inferior people). So far no repercussions, it is to be hoped his remarks will die 'in camera'.

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JOHN H. STEINHART, San Francisco ■

Senator Orrin Hatch, who had called to say he would come to the conference, did not show up. But both Senator Arlen Specter and Congressman Stephen Sollarz were there; and US Ambassador Galbraith (who was in Washington) sent an Embassy representative. There were a number of senators and deputies from European countries, former ministers -- like Simone Veil, Sonia Seite, Leo Hamon; local mayors, city councillors, political party representatives (Socialist, Radical, RPR, UDF); and for the Catholic Church, the Rev. Father Riquet made a point of saying he was representing Cardinal Lustiger and the French Episcopate. In addition, of course, community leaders from France and other lands, as well as several rabbis (the chief rabbis of France and Paris, but also of Luxembourg and Holland). In the audience were many writers, artists and other personalities, and an avalanche of messages kept coming in with good wishes and support declarations. Among them Elizabeth Taylor, Joan Baez, former French Minister Jean-Pierre Fourcade, Socialist Deputy Georges Sarre, Jacques Chirac, etc.

The recent escapee from Syria -- Haim -- spoke to hushed listeners with the hall darkened and a request to the press not to photograph. He did a creditable job, conquering all when he burst into tears at the end as he addressed the Syrian government to ask whether he will ever again see his family.

One could expect the speeches to be of virtually identical content, yet there were some moments of greater interest.

Mrs. Veil pointed up the disparity of opinion among the politicians present and how this disappeared on occasions when all could be united about fundamental belief in human rights and democracy. An excellent and realistic note was injected by Maurice Duverger, well known expert on Constitutional rights: Syria is Israel's major adversary since the Egypt/Israel peace agreement, its regime a harsh one. He reminded the public that 2/3 of the signatories of the Declaration of Human Rights did not respect them. Yet President Assad, while holding all the power, represents a minority group, the Alaouites. Hard, implacable, but very intelligent, Assad rides the crest again, holding Lebanon in a tight vise as a protectorate. Nonetheless, Assad will take note of those who came to speak here; and further interventions must take place, carefully prepared and backed with a serious dossier. France says Duverger, is presently in a good position to help; and so will the US be, for it too must develop relations with Syria in order to advance in the Middle East. Duverger also believes that Israel will have a role to play eventually, for there will be relations between it and Syria. But, he warned, Assad will make no gifts, not for human rights, not for conscience: he will deal only on a give and take basis.

A surprising presence and intervention was that of an officer of the Christian Lebanese Forces, who made an impassioned appeal for getting at the root of evil in the Middle East, namely Syria, which is holding the entire area hostage and is notorious for its intolerance for its neighbors. (He repeated this later, on the Jewish radio in Paris.)

Israel Ambassador to France, Ovadia Soffer, injected a strong plea for peace and cooperation between Jews and Arabs.

Adding some excitement to the meeting was the radio interview on the same morning by French journalists in Damascus with President Assad, who when questioned about the meeting declared that Zionism, a racist movement, inspired manifestations such as the SIONA conference; and that such meetings were an interference in internal affairs of Syria, a gross provocation, causing prejudice for Jews throughout the world and constituting a dangerous precedent. Were this to become a rule, he said, Syria too should take an interest in the fate of Jews, Christians or Moslems in France. As for the Jews in Syria, they have the same rights as other citizens, the majority among them less obligations. "They study in our schools, in our universities, some are state functionaires, others in liberal professions; and you have seen their commercial activities in Damascus... There are 4000 Jewish citizens, of which more than half are women. None have asked to serve in the army, but if such a request were addressed to me I will not fail to examine it."

Several speakers at the meeting, notably former Gaullist Minister Leo Hamon, forcefully rejected the accusation of interference in internal affairs -- "It is the duty of free countries which abide to human rights to cry out against violations elsewhere."

Had nothing else been accomplished with this Conference, there is the fact that Syria did indeed notice, at the highest level.

The resolution proposed at the end (translation sent to George Gruen a few days ago) was slightly amended: the first preamble paragraph added the presence of international representatives of governments and organizations; after the appeal made to the President of the French Republic to intervene with President Assad a call to leaders of other lands was added; and to the last paragraph, a phrase to include Jews and non-Jews forbidden free emigration from countries of their nationality and residence -- an opening for Soviet Jews and all other suffering minorities. The resolution was unanimously voted.

It was further agreed that a number of suggestions made during interventions be considered at a future date by a Permanent Committee, whose on the spot creation, under the chairmanship of Roger Pinto, also was unanimously voted. The Committee's composition is that of the representatives of the 20 countries at the conference, very light in structure, but with regular contact, to decide future action. In terms of immediate action, it was also agreed that each representative, upon his return home, would request meetings with the respective Foreign Ministers to ask intervention on behalf of Syrian Jews; and ~~to be connected~~ the Syrian Ambassador to their countries, as was done by the US organizations in Washington.

Additional action promised by speakers during the meeting was: from Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp (Holland) to ask the Dutch Council of Churches to act on behalf of Syrian Jews; from Leo Tamman, UK President of

WOJAC, to enlist the help of the churches for getting out the unmarried Syrian girls. Crif's President Théo Klein will ask an~~a~~ intervention of President Mitterrand. In this connection, I urged and have been assured that in the presentation of restrictions against Jews in Syria only the paper prepared by George Gruen for the AJC/NEC meeting in Chicago be used.

Among the more spectacular and wildly applauded suggestions was that of Jean-Pierre Bloch (President of LICRA) "France sent boats to get Arafat and the PLO out of Lebanon when they were in danger -- let her do the same for the Jews of Syria!" More rational, but very hard to put into effect, to have a fact-finding mission go to Syria. Finally, the possibility of France agreeing to take in Syrian Jews in transit to whatever the country of their choice.

To conclude: misapprehensions about the appropriateness of holding this meeting now were unwarranted. The recent announcement that President Assad's brother Rifad will be returning to Syria and put in charge of the state's security affairs in itself justifies the conference. The number of persons and personalities that came to address the meeting or sent messages of solidarity and support was impressive; the many who came to listen to so many speeches, perforce repetitious ones, a proof that there was a latent need for the gathering. As Senator Specter remarked: I see a lot of clippings in your dossier, but they are all quite old. We must have fresh clippings and keep the Jews of Syria and those of the Soviet Union in the headlines. The Chad crisis stole the headlines, if ever they were slated; but the Conference was reported by all the French dailies (except the Communist) and one expects some of the weeklies as well.

Delegates came from far away places like Australia (also representing New Zealand) Argentina, Mexico, Panama. The last two, informed by our Mexico office, told me that had there been more advance notice many more would have come from Central and Latin America. The interest and profound concern among Syrians abroad over the fate of their brethren still in Syria was apparent during my conversations with Messrs. Harari and Sitt. They know practically each family, some are distant relatives, and Syrian Jews obviously remain a very closely knit community in spite of distance. Both Harari and Sitt want a maximum of facts; both are determined to work on the problem of Syrian Jews in their areas, perhaps with similar meetings. AJC should follow-up with them and guide them toward maximum success.

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CONFIDENTIAL

What follows is to be handled with the same discretion and confidentiality that a previous similar situation was given:

In private conversations with Messrs. Harari and Sitt mention was made of some very valuable Judaica in Syria, preciously guarded by the community both in Aleppo and Damascus, probably in Kamichlie as well: Sefer Torahs, ancient manuscripts, objects of cult.

What will happen to all this? they asked. I described very summarily our experience in Egypt and the help given by the Spanish Embassy and government at the time to ~~help~~ get out this kind of material. It may be possible, though certainly more difficult, to duplicate this. It will be difficult not only because of the difference between Egypt and Syria, but of the attitude of the Jews themselves. Those still in Syria have always rejected any thought of letting go of these treasures. They guard it most zealously, some in their own homes. So it will be a problem to find someone like the courageous and dynamic gentleman that handled this delicate transaction in Egypt. Moreover, if a description of the religious community in Mexico is anything similar to that in Syria, and it must be, one will also have to deal with the particularities and sensibilities of each group.

I spoke of this briefly with Steve Chalom, and asked him to discuss the matter with George Gruen. His immediate reaction was "they'll never give it up, they are using it and will trust no one." But when I explained further, I could see he was very struck with the idea. Heard on the following day that he had in fact discussed it with Messrs. Harari and Sitt. Though I recommended utmost discretion I also learned that they did mention the problem to some of the Israelis, whose reaction was to be expected: you must build a Center for the material in Israel. They needed no convincing that this was hardly the thing to do: there are Syrian communities alive and well in safe lands, the treasure is theirs, its final destination their decision. Of course, the Israelis were involved and needed at the time the material was taken out of Egypt, and let us hope that a calm approach and discreetness will prevail. I suggested to all that the first step is securing as accurate a list as possible of what is there.

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P.S. Just had a telephone call from Roger Pinto, to inform me that Olivier Stirn, former Minister during Giscard's regime, now a Deputy (center-left of Giscard Party) will raise a question at the National Assembly this coming Wednesday, about Syrian Jews.

I took the occasion to ask Pinto for the real story on Poher, and he promised it, but not over the telephone. Pinto has been very praising of AJC, thanked us publicly for our help and cooperation and has made no bones about declaring on every possible occasion that AJC was the only US organization that helped with the Conference.

CC: Taubman  
Gruen  
Mandelsteyn

# NEWS

FROM THE COMMITTEE

**aje** THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE Institute of Human Relations, 165 E. 56 St., New York, N.Y. 10022, (212) 751-4000

The American Jewish Committee, founded in 1906, is the pioneer human-relations agency in the United States. It protects the civil and religious rights of Jews here and abroad, and advances the cause of improved human relations for all people.

MORTON YARMON, Director of Public Relations

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

NEW YORK, Nov. 14...Noting the perilous situation facing Jews in Syria and the Soviet Union, the American Jewish Committee has called upon all Americans who support human rights to continue to speak out on behalf of Jews in both nations, and who are denied their rights to emigrate as they continue to suffer from discriminatory abuses in business, employment and education.

In addition, the AJC's National Executive Council, which passed unanimously the resolutions decrying the human rights violations, issued a special appeal to the Soviet Government "to heed the multitude of appeals and petitions from throughout the world and release Nobel Laureate Andrei Sakharov and his wife Yelena Bonner, whose struggle for human rights in the USSR and for world peace touches us all."

At the same time, the NEC urged the U.S. Government "to continue to express to the Soviet leadership at every opportunity the concern of the American people for the Sakharovs, and the need for immediate and independent confirmation of their status."

Regarding the 4,500-member Syrian-Jewish community, who are barred from employment in government and banking and suffer restrictions on their rights to sell or inherit property, the AJC called upon Syria to live up to its obligations undertaken in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and to allow Jews the right to join their relatives in countries where they may live in freedom and free from fear.

In the Soviet Union, the National Executive Council voiced "its grave concern" over the serious deterioration of the situation of Soviet Jews, including the virtual shut-off of emigration, the campaign against Jews by the media, and

more....

Howard I. Friedman, President; Theodore Ellenoff, Chair, Board of Governors; Alfred H. Moses, Chair, National Executive Council; Robert S. Jacobs, Chair, Board of Trustees;

David M. Gordis, Executive Vice-President

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CSAE 1707

rising incidences of forced entry into the homes of Jews where religious items are either seized or destroyed.

The resolution also expressed "special concern" over new statements by police officials who have alleged that Jews use drugs for their religious practices.

"We acknowledge with gratitude," the text continued, "the persistent efforts of our government to maintain this issue as a priority on the agenda of U.S./USSR relationships. We call upon the U.S. and other Western delegates to the Madrid Review Conference follow-up meetings in 1985 -- the Human Rights Meeting in Ottawa and the Cultural Forum in Budapest -- to insure that the issue of Soviet Jews receives the attention it merits."

In addition, the resolution, prepared by the AJC International Relations Commission, headed by Leo Nevas of Westport, Connecticut, and directed by Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, called on scientists, educators, and religious and ethnic groups to continue to speak out on behalf of Jews deprived of practicing their professions, cultural traditions, religious beliefs and ethnic heritage.

The text ended with an appeal to the Soviet Government "to forsake its anti-Jewish policies and to abide by the international treaties and conventions to which it is a signatory."

The American Jewish Committee is this country's pioneer human relations organization. Founded in 1906, it combats bigotry, protects the civil and religious rights of people here and abroad, and advances the cause of improved human relations for all people everywhere.

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(34/cpa)



**SYRIA'S 5,000 JEWISH HOSTAGES**

by George E. Gruen, Ph.D.  
Director Middle East Affairs  
International Relations Department

The Syrian Foreign Ministry, in announcing the release of the captured American pilot, Lieut. Robert O. Goodman, Jr., declared that the Syrian Government was "answering the human appeal of the Rev. Jesse Jackson to President Hafez al-Assad, . . ." If the Syrian President truly wishes to show that he is responsive to humanitarian appeals, then let him once and for all stop holding the Jewish community hostage and permit those who might wish to leave to be reunited with their families in the United States and other Western democracies.

Fear has gripped the 5,000 Jews of Syria in the wake of the unsolved brutal murder and mutilation of a pregnant Jewish mother and her two small children in Aleppo.

On December 28, Chaim Victor Abadi, a prominent jeweller and merchant, received an obscene phone call at his office in which the anonymous caller described the unspeakable acts he had perpetrated against his beautiful wife. Mr. Abadi at first dismissed the call as a vulgar prank, but he was horrified on returning home to find that Lillian, his 25-year-old wife, had been shot and repeatedly stabbed, her breasts cut, her stomach slit open, the fetus killed, and her body mutilated. Beside her lay the bodies of their two children, Joseph, six, and Sandy, three. The little boy's arms had been broken and the girl's body was cut to pieces.

The Jewish community does not believe that this atrocity was the work of a common thief, because this vile murder was followed by telephone calls to several members of the Aleppo Jewish community, made in the dead of night, warning them that "you are next." The Syrian authorities have launched an investigation and are providing police protection to the threatened families. Some suspect that members of Rifaat Assad's defense companies carried out this atrocity as part of a plan to terrorize the Jewish community and enrich themselves. The special defense companies, whose ostensible mission is to protect President Hafez al-Assad from internal subversion, have in the past entered homes and extorted money from wealthy Syrian families and engaged in numerous atrocities.

According to Amnesty International and correspondents of the New York Times and the Washington Post, these forces in February 1982 killed 10,000 to 20,000 residents and demolished the heart of the ancient city of Hama in the process of crushing a rebellion by the fundamentalist Moslem Brotherhood. There were no Jews living in Hama. Syria's Jews are concentrated in Damascus (4,000), Aleppo (700), and Qamishly (200). While the Jews resent the Syrian Governments's singling them out for special treatment and its refusal to permit them to emigrate, they are loyal to President Assad. As one Syrian Jew recently explained, "We feel we are hostages today, but if Hafez al-Assad should be overthrown things will be much worse for us." The Jews fear that the Moslem Brotherhood would embark on wholesale pogroms against the Jews.

Despite the obvious antipathy of the Jewish community to the Moslem Brotherhood, the members of the defense companies have at times taken advantage of the Jewish community's defenselessness. This is not the first crime suffered by the Abadi family. During a house-to-house search in Aleppo in July 1980, a defense unit entered the home of Mr. Abadi and took him with them to identify other Jewish homes in the neighborhood. A guard was posted outside and the captain remained behind, ostensibly to search the house. Finding nothing incriminating, he ordered Mrs. Abadi to strip to prove she was not concealing Moslem Brotherhood literature on her person, and then raped her. A protest to the authorities led to a promise of an investigation, but no announcement was made as to whether the officer involved was punished or reprimanded. Several other Jewish women in Aleppo were also violated, but were too afraid to protest.

Since the Jewish community is kept under especially close surveillance by the Mukhabarat (the Syrian secret police), it is hard to believe that ordinary Syrians would dare on their own to harm members of the Jewish community. Indeed, following the evacuation of the Palestine Liberation Organization forces from Beirut in August 1982, the Mukhabarat picked up two armed Palestinians who had entered the Jewish quarter in Damascus without permission and warned them that they would be arrested if they entered again. Whereas in the past the secret police had not intervened when the Palestinians living among the Jews had harassed the latter, in recent years the Mukhabarat had been ordered by President Assad not to allow the Palestinians to molest the Jews.

While all Syrians feel vulnerable because of the internal strife and external problems facing the country, the Jews are in a uniquely precarious position. They are the only group that is totally forbidden to emigrate. Their identity cards are stamped "Musawi" (followers of Moses). Religion is no longer listed for other Syrians and about a million Moslem and Christian Syrians have managed to go abroad. Non-Jews can travel to neighboring Lebanon and Jordan without requiring a passport. Those few Jews who are permitted to travel abroad for business, medical or family reasons, must post a bond of \$5,000 and leave close members of the family behind as guarantee of their return.

A decade ago, in March 1974, two young Syrian Jewish men were killed and four young Jewish women were raped and murdered as they attempted to flee to neighboring Lebanon. In response to numerous international protests, including a personal appeal by President Jimmy Carter, 14 unmarried Jewish women were permitted to come to the United States in July 1977 to marry. There were hopes that Assad would fulfill the promise he made to Carter at their meeting in Geneva in May 1977 that additional Syrian Jews would be permitted to leave for humanitarian reasons "on a case by case basis." Yet in the past six years only a few dozen persons, mostly ill or aged, have been permitted to leave.

The Syrian authorities have continued to deny appeals for family reunion in the United States, where there are some 25,000 Jews of Syrian origin. There are presently some 400 additional unmarried Jewish women in Syria who find it difficult to find suitable husbands, since many young Jewish men had earlier fled the country.

The tragedy of the Abadi family would have been averted had the Syrians permitted family reunion. Lillian Antebi Abadi's parents and her brother are currently residing in the United States. She and her husband were permitted to visit them last year, but with exquisite cruelty, the Syrian authorities forced the couple to leave their three-year-old daughter with relatives in Aleppo, to assure that the family would return to Syria.

Another heartbreaking case is that of the Barakat family from Qamishly. Mrs. Batya Barakat, a mother of four small children, was gravely wounded and paralyzed when she was shot by Syrian border guards in August 1979 as her family attempted to escape to freedom. After posting a \$10,000 deposit she was permitted to come to the United States for medical treatment, accompanied by her aged parents. Her husband was imprisoned for six months after another unsuccessful attempt to flee. After many diplomatic interventions, the husband and the two older children were permitted to join her. But her two youngest children, Gaby and Filly, now aged 9 and 6, are still not permitted to leave Syria. Their mother has not seen them for more than three years. She needs another operation to try to avert total paralysis, but refuses to undergo the risk unless she can first see her children.

It will take more than the release of one American airman to convince the world that President Assad has become a humanitarian.

## AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

### STATEMENT ON MURDER OF SYRIAN JEWISH FAMILY

NEW YORK, Jan. 3...The American Jewish Committee today condemned the savage killing last week in Aleppo, Syria, of a 25-year-old pregnant Jewish mother and her two small children, and called on the Syrian Government to apprehend the murderers and bring them to justice.

Howard I. Friedman of Los Angeles, president of the American Jewish Committee, denounced the murder in Aleppo last Wednesday of Mrs. Lillian Antabi Abadi, A Syrian Jewish mother, and her two children, Joseph, six-and-a-half years old, and Sandy, three-and-a-half years old, as "a brutal, savage act which must be condemned by all civilized people."

According to reports received from several sources by the AJC's International Relations Department, when the father, Chaim Victor Abadi, a Syrian Jewish merchant, returned home, he found his pregnant wife dead, her breasts cut, her stomach slit open, and her body mutilated. The hands of the son were cut, and the little girl's body was cut to pieces.

"We do not believe," Mr. Friedman said, "that this was the doing of a common thief, because "this vile murder was followed by a number of telephone calls to several members of the Aleppo Jewish community made in the dead of night, warning them that 'you are next'."

"We see this as an effort to terrorize the miniscule Jewish community of Syria," Mr. Friedman said, and "therefore, it is all the more important that President Hafez Assad make clear by his actions that higher authorities in the Syrian Government are not condoning these actions."

The AJC president also called on the Syrian Government to allow those Syrian Jews who wish to leave to do so, without being forced to leave behind members of their families as hostages. There are about 700 Jews in Aleppo, and approximately 4,000 in Damascus and 200 in Qamishly.

Mr. Friedman reported also that the AJC has been in regular contact with the U.S. State Department as soon as it learned of this tragedy, and that American authorities have been most sympathetic and helpful in communicating concern to Syrian authorities.

January 3, 1984  
84-960-002

FROM THE DESK OF.....  
HOWARD KOHR

1/10/84

To: Marc Taxentbaum



For your information

Howard



# THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

WASHINGTON REPRESENTATIVE • 2027 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. • Washington, D.C. 20036 • (202) 265-2000

January 10, 1984

Commissioner Alan Nelson  
Immigration & Naturalization  
Services  
425 Eye St. NW  
Washington, DC 20536

Dear Mr. Nelson:

We are writing asking that your office intervene directly into the cases of several Syrian Jews who have been denied asylum and face exclusion or deportation proceedings in the near future. The cases involve Ezra and Karaz C. Antebi (A24-082-456 and A24-082-457) and their son Moussa (A24-082-457) all of whom currently reside in Brooklyn, New York.

Our concern is that at a time when tensions between the U.S. and Syria are at their highest and reports indicate that Syrians are involved with the killing of U.S. Marines in Lebanon, it is hard for us to imagine that INS officials would deem it appropriate to return to Syria several members of a minority sure to face difficulties upon their return.

Just last week we learned from sources in Aleppo, Syria that the daughter of the Antebis was brutally murdered and mutilated along with her two young children after receiving an anonymous phone call threatening her life. In addition, several other of her Jewish neighbors have received similar threatening phone calls. In light of this information, we feel that the Antebi's do indeed face a well-founded fear of persecution if they were to be returned to Syria.

Syrian Jews are singled out for more restrictive treatment than other Syrians. There is an official ban on emigration of Jews. Jews are the only ones required to post a bond -- between two and ten thousand dollars -- when traveling abroad and they are the only ones against whom the government continues its policy of not issuing passports to all members of a family at once.

-- more --

Given these facts, and the current hostilities between the U.S. and Syria, we feel that on its face a policy of returning Syrian Jews to Syria is not only offensive but bad policy.

We appeal to you to investigate these cases and other cases involving Syrian Jews. We welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues with you at your convenience.

Sincerely,

*Mark Talisman*

Mark Talisman  
Washington Representative  
Council of Jewish  
Federations

*Hyman Bookbinder*

Hyman Bookbinder  
Washington Representative  
American Jewish Committee

MT/HB:dw

cc: Senators:

Rudy Boschwitz  
Alan Simpson

cc: Congressmen:

Peter Rodino  
Stephen Solarz