



AMERICAN ISRAEL ACTION COALITION

Feisty First Ever U.S. Presidential Debate Held in Jerusalem

(September 27, 2008) While many found the first Obama-McCain presidential debate on Friday night "lukewarm" or "tepid gruel", the night before a far more feisty and controversial debate was held in Jerusalem. In an historic first, the American Israeli Action Coalition (AIAC) organized and sponsored a U.S. Presidential Style debate held in Israel. Research indicates that this may have been the first time a debate of this type was held anywhere outside of the United States.

AIAC is a non-partisan, non-political, issue-oriented NGO which is devoted to effectively recruiting and activating the more than 250,000 expatriate American citizens living in Israel in order to create a united voice that will be heard by the governments of the United States and Israel on issues that pertain to the continued safety and security of Israel and the Jewish People worldwide.

A full house of hundreds of American citizens residing in Israel listened attentively and enthusiastically as representatives of the U.S. Presidential candidates spelled out their respective campaign's policies on issues of interest to the Israel-based voter as well as American domestic issues.

At the debate, Senator John McCain, the Republican Presidential nominee, was represented by Marc Zell, co-chair of Republicans Abroad - Israel. Senator Barack Obama, the Democratic Presidential nominee, was represented by Sheldon Schorer, counsel to Democrats Abroad - Israel. Harvey Schwartz, AIAC's Chairman, was the Moderator.

Schwartz stated that "in order to make the debate as authentic and meaningful as possible, AIAC adopted a very innovative approach. AIAC presented to the debaters a list of questions—many of which were suggested by its members—about matters relating to Israel and American society. The debaters, in turn, submitted those questions to the candidates for their responses. It was those responses which the debaters reported at the debate as their respective candidate's actual answers to those questions. "Thus", said Schwartz, "it was as close as possible to having Senators Obama and McCain actually present at the debate and answering questions in person. The audience really appreciated the innovation".

The issues discussed were as diverse as the Iranian threat, peace between Israel and its neighbors, the status of Jerusalem, granting a pardon to Jonathan Pollard, the current U.S. economic crisis, energy policy, healthcare

and why each of the candidates would make the best President and Vice-President.

The latter issue became so heated that Zell rose to his feet and challenged Schorer's assertion that Governor Sarah Palin had authorized books to be banned from an Alaskan library.

"That's an outright lie. That is an outrageous fabrication," said Zell, jumping out of his seat. "I challenge you, Sir, to produce competent evidence of that charge. This is just another in a long series of outlandish slanders the Democrats have been concocting to disparage the reputation of Governor Palin."

"I made a statement based on what I heard and read," a somewhat shocked-looking Schorer said.

This outburst was typical for an evening where no punches were pulled on all the substantial issues. The audience loved the back-and-forth and contributed with its own cheers and applause from both Democrat and Republican supporters.

The Republican representative, Zell, started the evening explaining to the crowd of Americans residing in Israel that "Obama does not get it" in reference to the peace process and claimed that an Obama administration would be a return to the failed Clinton policies in the Middle East.

Schorer shot back declaring that he can "not understand how anybody who is concerned about Israel's security and the threat of Iran could be supportive of George Bush's foreign policy" and that McCain would be more of the same.

Zell again launched an attack on Obama's foreign policy inexperience. Obama was attacked by the Republican for calling on the United Nations Security Council to create a resolution calling for a withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia in the recent conflict, before later realizing that Russia has a veto in the Security Council.

Schorer conceded that although Obama had to qualify an earlier statement calling Jerusalem "Israel's undivided capital", the original statement was obviously where the Illinois Senator's true feelings were on the issue.

On Jerusalem, Zell was more certain and direct. "When John McCain says he stands for a united, undivided Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel, you can take that to the bank," the Republican representative said.

Unlike the Mississippi debate between Senators Obama and McCain, the Jerusalem version entertained some questions from the audience.

Members of the audience threw out some tough questions on diverse issues like offshore drilling and healthcare which were each in turn handled well by the two representatives.

One young American stated that she was very nervous at the increasing invasion of privacy in American citizen's lives. Governor Palin was a controversial subject for some in the audience and Schorer described her as "an extremist".

The debate was defined as a resounding success by many of the audience who urged Schwartz to extend the time to allow for more questions. Even when the debate was over, many audience members surrounded the two representatives pressing for more answers on key issues of importance.

"The American citizens in Israel are very politically sophisticated. An overwhelming majority of those eligible to vote will do so. They are acutely aware that in what everyone thinks will be an extremely close election, their votes will carry great weight in determining the final outcome. They are convinced that their actions will be of material assistance to Israel and American society as a whole" noted Schwartz. "AIAC is delighted to have produced this historic event in Jerusalem and to have provided to the Americans in Israel an exciting preview of what Senators Obama and McCain will say when they finally meet to debate. This is exactly the type of activity in which the AIAC membership will continue to be involved".

The event was co-sponsored by VotefromIsrael.org, who invited the audience to register for an absentee ballot for the upcoming elections. The organization signed up numerous eligible voters to add to the thousands they have already registered to vote.

After the debate, David Forster, a long time American resident said "Hats off to AIAC for running this debate, it was really meaningful to me as an American. I'm amazed that this was never done before."

Shanel Melamed from California, who is currently studying at the Hebrew University, said "The event was amazing and I will not be able to stop talking about it with my friends for days."

AIAC can be reached at www.aiacoalition.org.

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For additional information please contact:
Mr. Ashley Perry, Media Relations
American Israel Action Coalition
Email: presidentialstyledebate@gmail.com
Phone: +972 54 555 1974