

Obama defends his Israel policy at Jewish conference

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NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. (RNS) President Obama told a supportive crowd of Reform Jews here on Friday (Dec. 16) that no other administration in U.S. history "has done more in support of Israel's security."

"Don't let anybody else tell you otherwise. It is a fact," Obama told more than 4,500 people attending the biennial convention of the Union for Reform Judaism.

The audience of rabbis, lay people and members of an enthusiastic contingent of Reform teenagers were on their feet numerous times during his 30-minute speech.

Obama credited the Reform movement -- representing 1.5 million people and 900 synagogues in North America -- with contributing to a range of social justice issues, including helping draft civil rights legislation. "Without these efforts I probably wouldn't be standing here today," he said.

Obama ticked off his accomplishments, such as repealing the ban against openly gay military members, working for equal pay and health care reform.

He also made a special case for his administration's Israel policy, which has been criticized by some conservative Jewish groups as too pro-Palestinian, and caused some to wonder if some Jewish voters will abandon Obama in next year's elections.

"As president, I have never wavered in pursuit of a just and lasting peace -- two

states for two peoples, an independent Palestine alongside a secure Jewish State of Israel," he said.

Obama added that he has worked with allies against a particular threat to Israel by trying to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Washington-based Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said after the speech that his organization has appreciated that Obama has made the Iranian threat "a major priority."

Earlier in the meeting, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak stated his assurance of the strong links between the U.S. and Israel, including work to deter Iran.

"The unshakeable bonds between Israel and America and their respective Defense establishments under the guiding hand of President Barack Obama are stronger and deeper than ever, and we are very thankful and appreciative of that," he said in remarks on Thursday.

Obama's speech came within weeks of the Washington meeting of the Republican Jewish Coalition, where most of the GOP presidential candidates hammered Obama on his Middle East policy.

On Thursday, the "Emergency Committee for Israel" took out ads in major U.S. newspapers questioning Obama's record on Israel.

The ads accused the Obama administration of treating Israel "like a punching bag," and quoted "cheap shots" made by U.S. officials about the Jewish state.

David A. Harris, president and CEO of the National Jewish Democratic Council,

countered the ads saying the Republicans who placed them "have plenty of cash on hand to spread myths about this president, and to shamefully turn support for Israel into a partisan football."

Pollster Jim Gerstein, writing last month (November) in *The Forward*, a prominent Jewish publication, predicted that Jews' approval of the president's job performance -- which is higher than the approval of the American electorate -- and their general opposition to political conservatives and the Republican Party will help Obama in the 2012 election.