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Van Hollen issues clarificationSome critics still question commitment to Israel

by Eric Fingerhut

Staff Writer

Rep. Chris Van Hollen wanted to take a shot at Bush administration foreign policy, but he ended up hitting Israel as collateral damage.

And while some of his constituents in Maryland's 8th District, as well as some Jewish leaders, say the clarification he released last week of his initial letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice repairs a good portion of the injury, others say he still "doesn't get it."

The controversy over the letters has led to the formation of a new ad hoc group, Van Hollen Watch, which plans to hold a community forum, "Is Chris Van Hollen the Right Person to Represent the Jewish Community of Montgomery County?" next Thursday night at the Kemp Mill Synagogue in Silver Spring.

And, Van Hollen (D) said Tuesday that he has been discussing with Jewish community members the possibility of traveling to the Jewish state within the next couple of weeks.

Some in the area, including Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington executive director Ron Halber, greeted Van Hollen's clarification positively.

"It goes a long way toward reassuring his pro-Israel supporters that Chris Van Hollen will continue to be a pro-Israel advocate," said Halber, although he added, "I think Chris has work to do."

"He needs to continue to reach out to the Jewish community ... to reassure the Jewish community he's going to be there" for Israel, Halber said.

But David Friedman, the Anti-Defamation League's Washington regional director, said that the explanation "doesn't undo the damage of the first letter," which "shouldn't have been sent."

"I hope that the congressman understands the depth of community feeling about this," said Friedman.

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Van Hollen's clarification arrived in e-mail boxes around the 8th District late Friday afternoon, two days after he met with a group of Jewish community leaders and pro-Israel supporters upset by his initial missive.

That letter, dated July 30, said that "a continuation of the bombing campaign [in Lebanon] as it is being carried out is against the interests of Israel and the United States." In a Washington Post column last week, Israel critic Robert Novak positively flagged Van Hollen's comments as one of the few examples of a member of Congress criticizing the Jewish state.

A 45-minute meeting with Van Hollen on Wednesday of last week was held at the Bethesda home of Van Hollen supporters Richard and Helane Goldstein, who are also activists with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Others attending that meeting included Halber, JCRC president Susan Weinberg and Jewish community activist and Van Hollen supporter Danny Krifcher.

Participants refused to provide details of the conversation, other than repeatedly to describe the gathering as "productive."

"Our concerns were definitely heard," said Helane Goldstein.

In his clarification, Van Hollen explained that the original letter was intended as "a critique of what I believe to be the consequences of the Bush Administration's failed policies in the Middle East ... especially the war in Iraq."

Specifically, he said, the Iraq war had diminished U.S. influence in the region, boosted Islamic radicals and not led to progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

"I am sorry if my strong criticism of the Bush Administration's failures has been interpreted as a criticism of Israel's conduct in the current crisis," he wrote. "That was certainly not my intention."

Van Hollen's clarification did not disavow any of his earlier statements, but primarily addressed what he called "misinterpretations" of two specific points: his suggestion that the U.S. should have asked Israel to limit its attacks to "clear, identifiable Hezbollah military assets," and his call for an "immediate cease-fire."

On the first point, Van Hollen noted the many times his initial letter called Israel's attacks justified or blamed Hezbollah for civilian deaths in Lebanon.

He said that he intentionally did not use the term "disproportionate force" because he believes the extent and level of force used is justified.

Instead, he said he was suggesting that if the U.S. had asked Israel to "temporarily slow down" its offensive and used "effective diplomacy" early in the crisis when the Lebanese people and many in the Arab world were faulting Hezbollah, that group could have been politically isolated and international pressure could have been focused on Iran and Syria.

"I may be wrong about that. We will never know," he wrote, but he points out that Arab public opinion has turned and the terrorist group is seen "as the protector of Lebanon."

On the latter issue, Van Hollen admitted that "some ambiguity in my letter has created understandable confusion."

He said he supported a cease-fire only accompanied by "the rapid deployment

of an international force in southern Lebanon" that would allow Israeli troops to stay in place until the international force arrived - a framework similar to what was agreed to by the United Nations Security Council and both sides late last week.

He concludes the four-page statement, longer than his original three-page letter to Rice, by stating that "You may dispute certain policy conclusions that I reach, but I hope you won't question my motivation. While we may disagree on certain points, we share the common goal of ensuring that the United States and Israel will prevail in the war on terror and in guaranteeing the long-term survival and vitality of the State of Israel."

Krifcher believes the clarification addresses the concerns Israel supporters had about Van Hollen's initial missive. Van Hollen, he said, understands that the Rice letter created confusion that he needed to clarify about his feelings toward Israel.

"I think that over the coming days and weeks that the letter he sent to the secretary of state will really be seen as an outlier of Chris' support for Israel, and we'll see how strongly Chris stands for Israel," said the Potomac resident.

Nathan Diament, director of the Orthodox Union's Institute for Public Affairs, said that Van Hollen may have miscalculated in blasting Bush on Israel.

Israel's supporters in his district "might have concerns about the Bush administration policy in Iraq," but they "separate the Israel issue from other issues," Diament said.

The O.U. official said, though, that it is important to have a sense of perspective.

"He's not Cynthia McKinney," referring to the recently defeated member of Congress from Georgia, who is considered by many the most anti-Israel member of the House of Representatives.

"I think fundamentally he is a supporter of Israel" and the district would be better served by "constructive conversation" rather than "confrontation," said Diament, who spoke to Van Hollen about the letter last week.

But other constituents, while stating that they appreciated Van Hollen's attempt at clarification, still faulted the new letter for falling short in some areas.

Bethesda's Leo Rennert, a Democrat, saw Van Hollen as "exploiting the crisis for partisan purposes."

"The security of Israel is too important to be used and exploited" for political gain, Rennert said.

Silver Spring's Ben Bazian, who called himself a right-of-center Democrat, made a similar comment.

"He's utilizing [Israel] as a mallet to the Bush administration," blaming the war on the president instead of supporting Israel's right to defend itself, he said.

Rennert also noted that Van Hollen made "no admission or reassessment" of his "negative characterization" of Israel's bombing in Lebanon and his wish that it had not been so extensive or lengthy.

Rennert and the group Van Hollen Watch, in a statement, also took issue with a paragraph in Van Hollen's original letter that went unremarked upon in his

follow-up: that "no lasting solution to the turmoil in the Middle East will be achieved without resolving the Israeli-Palestinian problem."

The true cause of the problem in the Middle East, the critics said, is anti-Semitism, jihadism and hatred for Israel in places such as Iran and Syria.

Carol Greenwald - one of six people on the Van Hollen Watch steering committee, which she said had a mailing list of 3,000 people - said the Van Hollen follow-up also "didn't indicate he understood the existential threat to Israel or the United States" from terrorism.

She also said that, although his votes on the Middle East have been good, he has not been a leader on pro-Israel legislation. The Rice letter, she said, was the first instance of Van Hollen taking a lead role.

"People [in the Jewish community] feel betrayed," said the Chevy Chase resident. "They've had fund-raisers for him, and this is what they get in return."

She also said that the organization would like to invite Van Hollen to a future meeting of the group.

Halber admitted that while Van Hollen has been a "strong supporter" of Israel, he had "not been a leader on the issue."

Van Hollen took issue with that characterization, arguing in an interview that he had been an original co-sponsor of the Syrian Accountability Act and out front on letters and legislation to put pressure on Iran and Hezbollah, among other examples.

Van Hollen said much of his office's feedback from the Friday letter has been appreciation that he took the time to clarify his views.

He is not surprised at the large response he has received.

"These are important issues at the top of the national security agenda," Van Hollen said, and "important issues generate ... discussion."

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