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Envoy's visit refreshes Utah-Israeli ties

Ambassador hopes BYU will send students back to Jerusalem soon

By Lisa Riley Roche and Tad Walch

Deseret Morning News

The Israeli ambassador to the United States, Daniel Ayalon, said Thursday he believes Brigham Young University students will return soon to that school's Jerusalem Center.

Ayalon sounded encouraged about his discussions with BYU officials on Wednesday. "They are making an effort," he said. "I think it is clear to them that Israel is safe because of the active measures the Israeli government took to fend off terrorism."

BYU spokeswoman Carri Jenkins said the university has no immediate plans to resume the Jerusalem Study Abroad program.

"We do monitor the situation and our hope certainly is to have students return," she said.

The ambassador, who came to Utah to attend a fund-raiser for the state chapter of the America-Israel Friendship League, held a press conference at the Capitol after meeting with Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. and other state officials.

"We value very much our relations with Mormons. We see them as being friends, as brothers, as allies," Ayalon told



Tom Smart, Deseret Morning News

Daniel Ayalon, left, the Israeli ambassador to the United States, with Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. Thursday in Salt Lake. Ayalon was in Utah for a fund-raiser.

reporters. "I hope soon they will reinstate their programs of sending their students."

The BYU Jerusalem Center is located in East Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives. BYU sent 174 students home in mid-semester in November 2000 after sequestering them inside the center for more than a month.

The center itself has remained open, but students have not returned. The U.S. State Department continues to recommend that Americans avoid travel to Israel. A new travel warning was issued in February and remains in effect. BYU policy prohibits its Study Abroad programs from operating in countries under travel warnings.

"Study at the Jerusalem Center does involve travel in the region around Jerusalem," Jenkins said.

No threats have been made against the center, students or the volunteers who have kept the center open, Jenkins said.

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The ambassador said that though there were "some difficulties during the violent years," things have improved dramatically in Israel. "From a situation five years ago, when we had suicide bombings on a daily basis, now we have almost none," he said.


Still, Ayalon said, "there is not an air-tight security control" and some problems still occur. "But it is very tolerable now," he said. "Israel is secure and we are very proud of that. I believe that Brigham Young will come back soon."

Attorney General Mark Shurtleff, a longtime backer of the friendship league who attended the ambassador's meeting with the governor, agreed.

"Obviously, the key right now is perception. Mom and Dad want it to be safe when they send their kids over there, so it's very important that the word get out to everybody that it is safe," the attorney general said.

Shurtleff said he felt safe on a visit to Jerusalem and "never felt in any danger whatsoever. We didn't travel with security and we never at any time felt threatened." He said statistically, Israel is safer than many American cities.

Sen. Patrice Arent, a Democrat from South Cottonwood and the vice president of the National Association of Jewish



Legislators, said at the press conference that she, too, hopes the BYU Center in Jerusalem reopens quickly.

Arent said she had no concerns visiting Jerusalem with her family. "I sent my daughter there last summer to study on her own," she said. "I'm taking her back this year along with my 11-year-old, and my husband is currently serving on sabbatical there at Hebrew University."

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