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'A higher standard'Virginia's A.G. returns from Israel with stronger commitment to the Jewish state

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After spending a week in Israel, Virginia Attorney General Bob McDonnell (R) says he sees an important similarity between the United States and the Jewish state.

"We hold ourselves to a higher standard" because of "our own traditions of the law," said McDonnell, recalling a favorite quote he heard on the trip: "With democracy, you fight with one hand tied behind your back < but that's what gives you the upper hand."

Interviewed by phone last Thursday, just a few hours before he was scheduled to return to the commonwealth, McDonnell said his "respect for Israel" had increased tremendously during the trip < his first ever to the Jewish state < and had "renewed my absolute commitment to support Israel at every turn."

"I have such a much better understanding of what Israel faces," McDonnell said, having seen the security challenges it deals with and "how complicated ... life can be" in the Jewish state.

McDonnell visited Israel as part of a National Association of Attorneys General delegation that also included the chief law enforcement officers from Georgia, Arizona, Rhode Island and Arkansas. The trip was co-sponsored by the America-Israel Friendship League and the Israeli government.

Among the highlights was a visit with Israeli Supreme Court president Dorit Beinisch, who he said was "very much what I would expect from a jurist in the U.S."

He was struck by her much heavier workload compared to her counterparts in the States. "They have to weigh in very quickly" on each decision, McDonnell said, noting that Beinisch told the group that her court writes thousands of opinions each year, compared with the fewer than 100 the U.S. Supreme Court issues annually.

Other than the lack of a constitution, McDonnell said he didn't find Israel's legal system that different from the American one. He did notice, though, that because there is no constitution, Israeli courts tend to rely more on the "common law of other countries." McDonnell noted that some U.S. Supreme Court justices have begun to reference the laws of other nations in decisions < something that he criticized when it was done in a recent capital punishment case.

He also said the Israeli courts were "a little more activist, particularly on issues of human rights" than in the U.S., but said that was understandable given the history and tradition of the Jewish people.

McDonnell added that he had been following through the Israeli newspapers the controversy over the proposed power cutoff of electricity to the Gaza Strip, and was impressed at "the way Israeli democracy works" and how Israeli Attorney General Menahem Mazuz, in blocking the cutoff, was following "the rule of law" instead of doing what may have been more "politically favorable."

McDonnell's delegation also met with former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and was briefed by top officials at the foreign and defense ministries. Based on those meetings, the attorney general said there may be reason for cautious optimism that the upcoming Annapolis peace summit will yield results.

The group also stopped at Camero, a high-tech company that has its North American headquarters in Fairfax. The company has developed an electromagnetic imaging system that allows one to see directly through opaque walls, which McDonnell described as having "enormous applications" for fire and police departments, as well as other kinds of law enforcement personnel.

McDonnell said he'd like to "open doors for them" in the U.S., help other Israeli companies expand and grow in Virginia, and promote further cultural and economic exchange programs with the Jewish state, as well.

The attorney general also said he was impressed just talking to everyday Israelis, including students at Bar Ilan Law School.

"There is an amazing resiliency," he said, noting that the students were optimistic and weren't going to allow the threat of terror to affect how they lived their lives.

In addition to learning about the politics, people, business and legal systems in Israel, McDonnell and the other attorneys general also saw the sights. The Virginian, who is Catholic, raved about seeing the Western Wall tunnels and visiting the Via Dolorosa and other sites Jesus had walked.

Looking back on the trip, McDonnell said, "It has certainly changed my life."

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