

Flap in Illinois Over GOP Threat

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A vulnerable Republican incumbent battling for re-election in suburban Chicago is facing criticism this week — including a call for a federal investigation — over an e-mail message in which an aide seemingly threatened to punish Tel Aviv University because one of its top American donors was backing the Democratic challenger.

The incumbent, Rep. Mark Steven Kirk, is a member of the House Appropriations foreign operations subcommittee. The subcommittee oversees America's foreign aid, including grants to educational institutions. Kirk has been under fire since the controversial e-mail was first reported October 26 in the Chicago Sun-Times. In the July 19 message, a Kirk aide urged Tel Aviv University's American fundraising chief to contact the university president, Itamar Rabinovitch, and tell him to warn the donor that his support for Democratic challenger Dan Seals "can have a very bad effect on the university." The donor, Robert Schroyer, is national chairman of the university's American Council, its fundraising arm.

Kirk said he reprimanded the aide and warned that he would fire her if she did it again.

The stakes rose this week when a former federal judge and White House counsel, Abner Mikva, wrote to the U.S. attorney and the Cook County state's attorney and asked for inquiries into whether the Kirk staffer, Caryn Garber, had broken any laws.

"Trying to intimidate people, especially leaders, is a serious offense," said Mikva, a onetime Democratic congressman who represented Kirk's 10th District in Chicago's heavily Jewish northern suburbs. "You don't reprimand somebody who has committed a felony," he told the Forward.

Critics say that Garber's e-mail was particularly threatening because of Kirk's position on the foreign operations subcommittee. For the past three years, the panel has awarded Tel Aviv University grants in the range of \$300,000 to \$400,000 to conduct research on Middle East genetic diseases. The 2007 grants have yet to be disbursed.

Mikva wrote that the email could violate legal bans on "intimidating, threatening or coercing members of the public in an attempt to thwart the free expression of their vote."

"Revenge is a dish best served cold," Garber wrote to the fundraiser. "I know that you and Itamar would not want TAU to be sullied by his out of control actions," he said, referring to Schroyer.

Both Garber and the fundraiser she contacted, Sam Witkin, president of the university's American Council, are former staffers of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the pro-Israel lobbying organization.

Another Chicagoan, former AIPAC national president Robert Asher, was quoted in the Sun-Times as saying, in a statement released by the Kirk campaign, that Garber's e-mail "does not threaten any action, particularly not a congressional action."

Schrayer, an insurance magnate, has long been associated with vigorous pro-Israel political activism. He was a key figure in a successful 1984 campaign to unseat Illinois Senator Charles Percy, who had angered pro-Israel activists. Schrayer currently serves on the boards of the Chicago Jewish United Fund and the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Both Kirk and Seals have zealous backers in the Chicago Jewish community who tout the candidates' respective positions on Israel.

Accusations have emerged in recent months that Kirk supporters seek to paint the Democrat's backers as anti-Israel. "People talk as if to not support Mark Kirk is to burn the Israeli flag," said Marc Slutsky, president of a nondenominational synagogue in Highland Park, Ill., Aitz Hayim. Slutsky argued that Seals, who is of a partially African American background, would be a strong pro-Israel voice in the Congressional Black Caucus, which Republicans have complained is weak in its support for the Jewish state.

Schrayer said he has faced attacks for months from Kirk supporters who seek to diminish his Jewish community leadership role. Last June, he said, when it became clear that he was supporting Seals, several federation donors sent e-mails to the charity's staff suggesting that Schrayer should not be in a federation leadership position if he did not support the Republican. Schrayer declined to name any individuals involved.

"I don't have to apologize to anyone on my support for Israel, and I would never support anyone for election who I thought didn't support Israel," he said. He also said that he might take the issue before a congressional ethics committee but would wait to see how Mikva's request for a probe unfolds.

The president of the Chicago federation, Steven Nasatir, declined to comment for this article.

An independent poll that was released October 30 showed Seals leading Kirk by two points with 48% of the vote. Kirk had a steady double-digit lead over Seals until mid-October, when the Democratic challenger began airing television ads.

Seals, who said that he grew up in a Jewish community in Hyde Park, Ill., framed the issue as one of accountability. Garber, he said, "got a slap on the wrist. I thought he should fire the employee and write a massive apology."

The Kirk campaign did not reply to repeated requests from the Forward for comment.