

Pro-Israel group asks RI delegation to support bill to quash boycotts of Israel

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. — A newly organized pro-Israel group is gathering at the State House on Monday to pressure Rhode Island's all-Democratic congressional delegation to support a bill intended to quash boycotts of Israel.

The Rhode Island Coalition for Israel, which describes itself as a “partnership between evangelical Christians and politically conservative Jews,” is advocating for legislation known as the Anti-Israel Boycott Act, which would expand a federal law against supporting foreign government boycotts to include those supported by organizations including the United Nations.

The act, which carries potential \$1 million fines and up to 20 years in prison for those convicted of breaking it, seeks to counter the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement against Israel's occupation of Palestine.

In an era of heavy partisanship, the bills have drawn rare support across the aisle, with 35 Republican Senate co-sponsors, including Senators Ted Cruz of Texas and Marco Rubio of Florida; and 13 Democrats, including Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York and Sen. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut.

The House bill has 186 Republican co-sponsors and 66 Democrats.

But the bills have raised alarm among civil liberties groups, which say they infringe on the First Amendment's protection of free speech and could criminalize political expression.

The American Civil Liberties Union wrote a letter to Congress in opposition to the bills saying they seek to “punish individuals for no reason other than their political belief.”

No members of the Rhode Island delegation are among the co-sponsors, although they have been cautious about criticizing it.

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse “has not taken a position on the bill,” said spokeswoman Meaghan McCabe in an email.

One of Whitehouse’s potential Republican campaign opponents, Republican state Rep. Bobby Nardolillo of Coventry, issued a statement earlier in the year saying he was “completely in favor” of the legislation and likening it to a state bill passed in 2016.

The Rhode Island bill, introduced by Rep. Mia Ackerman, requires companies to promise not to support boycotts of countries that are members of the World Trade Organization, which includes Israel.

Sen. Jack Reed’s office did not respond to requests for comment on the current federal boycott bill.

Responding to questions from members of the Rhode Island Coalition for Israel at a recent town hall, Rep. David Cicilline said he did not sign on to the bill because of the ACLU’s concerns about criminalizing political speech, but would consider supporting the bill if it was amended.

“I strongly oppose the BDS movement. ... But one of the things I am very concerned about ... is it criminalizes the behavior of someone and also criminalizes the behavior of someone who furnishes information from an inquiry,” Cicilline said at the town hall. “That is a very concerning thing to me.”

Rep. James Langevin has a similar position.

He “strongly opposes the BDS movement,” said spokeswoman Anita Baffoni in an email. “However, he has concerns with the potential consequences this legislation could have on free speech. He also believes we must be very careful in how we define territorial boundaries in absence of a peace deal.”

Since the free-speech concerns about the legislation were raised, many Democratic members of Congress who signed on to the bill have said they are reviewing the First Amendment concerns and considering amendments.

Howard Brown, a retired North Kingstown resident who is the executive director of the new Rhode Island Coalition for Israel, said the organization was founded “in response to overwhelming liberal attitudes in the state in terms of the Middle East conflict and blame mostly been aimed at Israel.”

The organization has also opposed the Iran nuclear deal made under President Barack Obama's administration.

Brown called free speech concerns about the boycott bill political "talking points" that carried little legal weight.

"The law as introduced was a no-brainer until someone discovered there was a talking point against it," Brown said.

The Coalition is holding a news conference at the State House at 1 p.m. Monday.

On the other side of the issue, critics of the recent round of anti-boycott laws, including last year's Rhode Island contracting bill, say they are really about clamping down dissent against the policies of the current conservative Israeli government.

"This bill is framed as regulating economic activity, but its primary goal is to stifle criticism of Israel. It was written by the [American Israel Public Affairs Committee,] a hawkish pro-Israel lobby that aligns with the Netanyahu government," said Nina Tannenwald, director of the international relations program at Brown University's Watson Institute. "It is a very complex but also misguided piece of legislation that will be difficult to enforce."

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