

Island leaders in Israel

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THE presidents of Nauru and the Federated States of Micronesia touched down in Israel yesterday morning to start a week-long visit.

The two presidents – Marcus Stephen and Emanuel Mori, respectively – will meet top Israeli officials, tour the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum, visit Christian sites in Jerusalem and the Sea of Galilee, and spend a day at a Dead Sea spa.

The whole thing is being orchestrated by the Israeli foreign ministry and the American Jewish Committee.

Nauru and Micronesia have a combined population of roughly 130,000 – the size of the Israeli city of Ashkelon.

But they're considered critical allies for Israel, which relies on the support of a handful of small countries – Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, the Marshall Islands – to shield it at the United Nations.

It had a falling-out with the Solomon Islands this year over the country's decision to endorse the Goldstone Report.

These countries insist they're not practicing "checkbook diplomacy"; indeed, they receive little in the way of foreign aid from Israel, or from the United States.

In a speech to the Jewish NGO Caucus in 2008, Marlene Moses, Nauru's envoy to the United Nations, said her country backed Israel out of genuine conviction.

"My country is a small, isolated island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Israel is an island in its own right, surrounded by a sea of unfriendly neighbors.

"Nauru lacks a diversity or abundance of natural resources, especially food, water, and energy. Israel also grapples with resource scarcity in these critical areas.

"I don't have any reason to disbelieve her, or criticize her motives. (Though I should note that the lavish visit this week certainly seems to be a reward for years of pro-Israel votes...).

But on the other side, it's instructive to compare the way Israel fetes the leaders of these small countries with the way it treats, say, Turkish officials.

The latter could play a constructive role in mediating regional conflicts – towards ending Israel's isolation in a "sea of unfriendly neighbors."

The former can do little for Israel except shield her bad behavior from criticism.

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