

Transcript of remarks by Senator Barack Obama
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SENATOR OBAMA: Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

I have repeatedly considered taking Rosy on the road with me for all of my introductions. Thank you, Rosy, for your friendship and your outstanding leadership on behalf of all of those of us in Chicago who are concerned about the U.S.-Israeli relationship. You do outstanding work.

To all my friends who are here -- and they're too numerous to mention -- I want to thank all of you for taking the time. Originally this event was described to me as a small gathering of friends. And looking out at all of you here today, seeing so many who I've worked with in the trenches for so long, seeing so many of you who care about peace in this world, who care about a strong and lasting friendship between Israel and the United States and who care about what's going on on the next page of our shared futures, I think a small gathering of friends fits this crowd just right. It's an apt description.

I want to begin by telling a story that builds off the trip that Rosy and I took together, the one that he mentioned. This was back in January of 2006 when I made my first trip to the Holy Land. And as so many of you know, it's a place like no other on Earth, a place filled with so much promise of what can truly be, what we can truly be as a people, a place with so much history, a place where we've learned how in a flash violence and hatred and intolerance can turn so much promise to rubble and send so many lives to their early graves. Now, most will travel to the holy sites when they visit: The Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Dome of the Rock, or the Western Wall. They make a journey to be humbled before God. And I too am blessed with seeing Israel this way, up close and on the ground, in quiet spaces and quiet moments.

But I'm also fortunate to have seen Israel from the air. On my journey that day, I flew on an IDF helicopter to the border zone. The helicopter took us over the most troubled and dangerous areas in that narrow strip between the West Bank and the Mediterranean Sea. And at that height, I could see the hills and the terrain that generations have walked across and generations have dreamed about. I could see and truly appreciate how close everything is and why peace through security is the only way for Israel.

Our helicopter landed in the town of Kiryat Shmona on the border. What struck me first about the village was how familiar it looked. The houses and streets looked like ones you might find in a suburb in America. I could imagine young children riding bikes down the street. I could imagine the sounds of their joyful play, just like the sounds that my own daughters make in Hyde Park. There were cars in the driveway. The shrubs were trimmed. The families were living their lives.

And then I saw a house that had been hit with one of Hezbollah's Katyusha rockets. The family who lived in the house was lucky to be alive. They had been asleep in another part of the house when the rocket had hit. They described the explosion. They were fortunate that only their dog was killed. They talked about the fire and the shrapnel. They spoke about what might have been if the rocket had come screaming into their home at another time when they weren't asleep but were sitting peacefully in the now destroyed part of the house.

It's an experience that I keep close to my heart, an experience that I think about whenever I think about the issues that we confront in the Middle East. Not because it's unique, but because we know that too many others have seen the same kind of destruction, have lost their loved ones to suicide bombers, and live in fear of when the next attack might hit.

Just six months after I visited, Hezbollah launched 4,000 rocket attacks just like the one that destroyed that home in Kiryat Shmona and kidnapped Israeli service members. And we pray for all the service members who have been kidnapped. Gilad Shalit, Eldad Regev, and Ehud Goldwasser. I met with the Goldwasser family this week in my office, and I offered to help in any way I could. And I was struck by the bravery and determination, but the understandable welling sadness of a family who had heard nothing about their beloved son.

It's important to remember this history -- that Israel had unilaterally withdrawn from Lebanon only to have Iran to supply Hezbollah with thousands of rockets.

Our job is to never forget that the threat of violence is real. Our job is to renew the United States' effort to help Israel achieve peace with its neighbors, while remaining vigilant against those who do not share that vision. Our job - Our job is to do more than lay out another roadmap. Our job is to rebuild the road to real peace and lasting security throughout the region.

That effort begins with a clear and strong commitment to the security of Israel, our strongest ally in the region and its only established democracy. That has been my starting point and that always will be my starting point. And when we see all the growing threats in the region, from Iran to Iraq to resurgents of al Qaeda to the reinvigoration of Hamas and Hezbollah, that loyalty and that friendship will guide me as we begin to lay the stones that will build the road that takes us from the current instability to lasting peace and security.

It won't be easy. Some of those stones will be heavy and tough for the United States to carry. Others will be heavy and tough for Israel to carry. And even more will be difficult for the world. But together we will begin again.

One of the heavy stones that currently rests at the United States' feet is Iraq. Until we lift this burden from our foreign policy, we cannot rally the world to our values and our vision.

As many of you know, I opposed this war from the beginning, in part because I believe in part because I firmly believed that giving this president the open-ended authority to invade Iraq would lead to an open-ended occupation that we find ourselves in today.

Now our soldiers find themselves in the crossfire of someone else's civil war. More than 3,100 have given the last full measure of devotion to their country. This war has fueled terrorism and helped galvanize terrorist organizations, it has spurred on anti-U.S. and further anti-Israel propaganda, it has made the world less safe.

And that's why I advocate a phased redeployment of U.S. troops out of Iraq to begin no later than May 1st, with the goal of removing all combat troops out of Iraq by March 2008.

In a civil war where no military solution exists, this redeployment remains our best leverage to pressure the Iraqi government to achieve the political settlement between its war infractions that can slow the bloodshed and promote stability.

My plan also allows for a limited number of U.S. troops to remain and prevent Iraq from becoming a haven for international terrorism and reduce the risk of all-out chaos. In addition, we will redeploy our troops to other locations in the region, reassuring our allies that we will stay engaged in the Middle East. And my plan includes a robust regional diplomatic strategy that includes talking to Syria and Iran; something that this administration has finally embraced. The U.S. military has performed valiantly and brilliantly in Iraq. Our troops have done all that we could have asked them to do and more. But one of the most profound consequences of the administration's failed strategy in Iraq has been to strengthen Iran's strategic position; reduced U.S. credibility and influence in the region; and place Israel and other nations friendly to the United States in greater peril. These are not signs of a well-paved road. It is time for a profound change.

As the U.S. redeploys from Iraq, we can recapture lost influence in the Middle East. We can refocus our efforts to critical yet neglected priorities, such as combating national terrorism and winning the war in Afghanistan. And we can, then, more effectively deal with what I consider to be one of the greatest threats to the United States, to Israel, and world peace, and that is Iran.

Iran's President Ahmadinejad's regime is a threat to all of us. His words contain a chilling echo of some of the world's most despicable and tragic history.

Unfortunately, history has a terrible way of repeating itself. President Ahmadinejad has denied the Holocaust. He held a conference in his country claiming it was a myth. We know the Holocaust was as real as the 6 million who died in mass graves at Buchenwald, or the cattle cars to Dachau, whose ashes clouded the skies at Auschwitz. We have seen the pictures. We have walked the halls of the Holocaust museum in Washington and Yad Vashem. Many in this room have heard stories from their parents and their grandparents. We've touched the tattoos of loved-ones arms. After 60 years, it's time to deny the deniers.

In the 21st century, it is unacceptable that a member state of the United Nations would openly call for the elimination of another member state. But that is exactly -- That is exactly what the president of Iran has done. Neither Israel nor the United States has the luxury of dismissing these outrages as mere rhetoric, particularly when that nation has expressed an interest in developing nuclear weapons.

The world must work to stop Iran's uranium enrichment program and prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

It is far too dangerous to have nuclear weapons in the hand of a radical theocracy. And while we should take no option, including military action, off the table, sustained and aggressive diplomacy combined with tough sanctions should be our primary means to prevent Iran from building nuclear weapons.

Iranian nuclear weapons would destabilize the region and could set off a new arms race. Some nations in the region, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, could fall away from restraint and rush into a nuclear contest that could fuel greater instability in the region.

And that's not just bad for the Middle East, that's not just bad for Israel, but it's bad for the world, making it a vastly more dangerous and unpredictable place.

Other nations would feel great pressure to accommodate Iranian demands. Terrorist groups with Iran's backing would feel emboldened to act even more brazenly under an Iranian nuclear umbrella. And as the A.Q. Kahn network in Pakistan demonstrated, Iran could spread this technology around the world.

We have to prevent this worst-case scenario. To prevent it, we need the United States to lead tough-minded diplomacy. This includes direct engagement with Iran similar to the meetings we conducted with the Soviets at the height of the Cold War, laying out in clear terms our principles and interests.

Tough-minded diplomacy would include real leverage through stronger sanctions. It would mean more determined U.S. diplomacy at the United Nations. It would mean harnessing the collective power of our friends in Europe who are Iran's major trading partners. It would mean a cooperative strategy with Gulf States who supply Iran with much of the energy resources it needs.

It would mean unifying those states to recognize the threat of Iran and increase pressure on Iran to suspend uranium enrichment. It would mean full implementation of U.S. sanction laws. And over the long-term, it would mean a focused approach from us here in the United States to finally end the tyranny of oil and develop our own alternative sources of energy to drive the price of oil down and disable those who would use the oil weapon to do us harm.

We also have to persuade other nations, such as Saudi Arabia, to recognize common interests with Israel in dealing with Iran. We should stress to the Egyptians that they -- we should stress to the Egyptians that they help the Iranians and do themselves no favors by failing to adequately prevent the smuggling of weapons and cash by Iran into Gaza.

The United States' leverage is strengthened when we have many nations with us. It puts us in a place where sanctions could actually have a profound impact on Iran's economy. Iran is highly dependent on imports and foreign investment, credit and technology. And an environment where allies see that these types of investments in Iran are not in the world's best interests could help bring Iran to the table.

Now, I have to make this clear. We have in America no quarrel with the Iranian people. They know, at least increasingly, that President Ahamadinejad is reckless, that he's irresponsible, and inattentive to their day-to-day needs, which is why they sent him a stinging rebuke at the ballot box this fall.

We hope and encourage more of them to speak out. There is great hope in their ability to see his hatred for what it is, hatred and a threat to peace in the region, as well as a threat to Iran's long-term well-being.

At the same time, we must preserve our total commitment to our unique defense relationship with Israel by fully funding military assistance and continuing work on the Arrow and related missile defense programs.

This will help Israel maintain its military edge and deter and repel attacks from as far as Tehran and as close as Gaza. And when Israel is attacked, we must stand up for Israel's legitimate right to defend itself.

Last summer Hezbollah attacked Israel. By using Lebanon as an outpost for terrorism and innocent people as shields, Hezbollah has also engulfed that entire nation in violence and conflict and threatened the fledgling movement for democracy there.

That is why we have to press for enforcement of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701, which demands the cessation of arms shipments to Hezbollah, a resolution which Syria and Iran continue to disregard.

And we had to ask the world community, those who might have been critical during that summer, what nation in this world would not respond when another nation crosses their borders, kidnaps their troops, and continues to rain down missiles on them. I don't know of any nation that would. We shouldn't expect Israel to do any less.

The support of Syria and Iran in terms of shipments of weapons to Hezbollah and Hamas, which threatens the peace and security in the region, must end, and the U.S. must send a strong signal that it needs to end.

Now, these are great challenges that we face, and in moments like this, true allies do not walk away. For six years, the administration, I believe, has missed opportunities to increase United States' influence in the region and help Israel achieve the peace she wants and the security that she needs.

I think it's time -- it's past time -- for us to seize those opportunities. The Israeli people, and Prime Minister Olmert, have made clear that they are more than willing to negotiate an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that will result in two states living side by side in peace and security.

But the Israelis must trust that they have a true Palestinian partner in peace. That's why we have to strengthen the hands of Palestinian moderates who seek peace, and that is why we must maintain the isolation of Hamas and other extremists who are committed to Israel's destruction.

The conditions for peace are not that complicated. The U.S. and our partners have put before Hamas three very simple conditions to end the isolation: First, recognize Israel's right to exist; second, renounce the use of violence; third, abide by past agreements between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

We should all be concerned about the agreement negotiated among the Palestinians in Mecca last month. All of us are glad that the shootings have lessened. On the other hand, the reports of this agreement suggest that Hamas, Fatah, and independent ministers would sit in a government together, under a Hamas prime minister, without any recognition of Israel, without any renunciation of violence, and with only an ambiguous promise to respect previous agreements is not good enough.

It should concern -- It should concern us because it suggests that Mahmoud Abbas, who is a Palestinian leader who I have met with and who I believe is committed to peace, continues to feel forced to compromise with Hamas. If we are serious about the Quartet's conditions, we must tell the Palestinians and Mr. Abbas that he has to do better.

As I said at the outset, Israel will also have some heavy stones to carry. Of course, Israel is used to carrying heavy stones. Its history has been full of tough choices in search of peace and security. Yitzhak Rabin had the vision to reach out to longtime enemies. Ariel Sharon had the determination to lead Israel out of Gaza despite the wrenching political costs. These were difficult, painful decisions that went to the heart of Israel's identity as a nation.

Many Israelis I talked to during my visit last year told me that they were prepared to make further sacrifices to give their children a chance to know peace. These were people who wanted a better life for their children, people of courage, people who had not lost hope.

And I know that during difficult times, it can be easy to lose hope. But we owe it to our sons and daughters, to our mothers and fathers, and to all of those who have fallen, to

continue searching for peace and security even if it seems distant, perhaps especially when the odds seem long and that our ultimate goal appears to recede on the horizon.

I believe this search is in the best interests of the United States. I believe this search is in the best interests of Israel. I believe it's in the best interests of all of us. We can and we should help Israelis and Palestinians both fulfill their national goals: Two states living side by side in peace and security.

Both the Israeli and Palestinian people have suffered from the failure to achieve this goal. The United States should leave no stone unturned in working to make that goal a reality.

But in the end we also know that we should never seek to dictate what is best for the Israelis and their security interests. No Israel prime minister should ever feel dragged to or blocked from the negotiating table by the United States. That's not what friends do.

We must be partners; we must be active partners. Diplomacy in the Middle East cannot be done on the cheap. Diplomacy is measured by patience and by effort. We cannot continue to have trips consisting of little more than photo ops with little movement in between. Neither Israel nor the United States is served by this approach.

Peace with security. That is the Israeli people's overriding wish. That is AIPAC's overriding wish.

It's what I saw in the town of Fassouta on the border with Lebanon. There are 3,000 residents of different faiths and histories in this small town. And I was accompanied by a number of people who are present in the audience today. It turns out that there is a community center in Fassouta supported by Chicago's own Roman Catholic Archdiocese and the Jewish Federation of Metro Chicago. It's where the education of the next generation has begun; in a small village, all faiths and nationalities, living together with mutual respect.

I met with the people from the village, and they gave me a tour of this wonderful place. There was a moment when young girls came in, and they played music and they began to dance. And the audience consisted of Jews and Christians and Muslims.

And after a few moments, I thought about my own daughters, Sasha and Malia, and how they, too, could dream and dance in a place like this, a place of renewal and restoration. There was a moment in which, as those young girls danced, where one could imagine a day in which this small place had expanded further and further, until what has been a place of strife and heartbreak was a place of brotherhood and promise and hope.

And that scene, I think, was proof that in the heart of so much peril there continues to be signs of a better day. That the universal song for peace plays on in the hearts of so many.

It will not be enough, as Rosy said, simply to hope for that day. The vision will not come about because we wish it so. It will come about because we have put the hard effort and the hard work.

And I can tell you that as a candidate for the president of the United States and as a president of the United States, I vow to work as diligently and as consistently and as determinedly as possible with AIPAC and with the Great State of Israel to bring that vision about.

Thank you very much.