

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert
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Allow me to depart from the protocol for one second. I was behind watching on a screen when Chen Abrahams from Sderot spoke to you. She spoke from the heart of Israel; she spoke in a way that only a person who lives there and has to go through the daily pains and fears of living under the attacks of the Kasam rockets can speak. She represented better than anyone can everyone of the Israelis and I know that her words and the look on her face I'm sure came across to the heart of everyone of you; thank you Chen very much for your wonderful words.

Distinguished members of the United States Senate and Congress; President of AIPAC, my congratulations to David Victor; ; Chairman of AIPAC, Howard Friedman; Executive Director, Howard Kohr; AIPAC Board of Directors; representatives of the students organizations ; representatives of the Diplomatic Corps; the Israeli Ambassador to the United States, Mr. Sallai Meridor, and all the Israeli official representatives who are present here tonight; honorable guests, dear friends; thank you AIPAC for providing this opportunity for all of us to come together and show support for Israel. It is always amazing to see the number of people that AIPAC manages together in one room. I believe this is the largest such gathering ever. After speaking to these students via video-conference last year, I knew that this year I would not miss the opportunity to participate in the unique experience of the AIPAC Policy Conference.

It is truly a pleasure to be here with so many great friends of Israel. Israel is grateful for AIPAC's tireless efforts and unending dedication to promoting the joint American Israeli relations, values, and interests; AIPAC empowers the next generation of American supporters of Israel and insures that the alliance between Israel and the United States is never taken for granted, and therefore delighted to see so many students here representing the younger future generation. Hi, students.

It serves to assure me and all of us that the traditional bonds of friendship between Israel and America will continue to be nurtured and strengthened. It's great to see you here and to feel you here. I understand that there are some members of the Senate and Congress in the audience. Israel is grateful for the long-standing bipartisan Congressional friendship and support manifested most recently by the initiative to mark Israel's 60th anniversary that we just celebrated. We

are particular thankful for your support and recognition of the 10-year Memorandum of Understanding between our countries.

The approval of the MOU from 2009 onward is crucial to maintaining Israel's security and qualitative edge. I recently had the opportunity to have lunch in Jerusalem with the Speaker of the House, my friend Nancy Pelosi, who led a distinguished Congressional Delegation to Israel. Our meeting allowed us to discuss a range of issues of mutual interest in a more personal and intimate form and served to assure me that the bipartisan support for Israel is stronger than ever.

I want to take this opportunity to extend an open invitation to each and every one of you to please come to Israel and do the same. And I assure you that you will be amongst friends. As we celebrate the 60th year of US Israeli relations I feel personally obliged to take a moment to reflect on and remember a close personal friend, Congressman Tom Lantos.

Tom was a visionary Congressman, a dedicated American patriot and a symbol of friendship to Israel. Earlier this week I met with Annette Lantos in Jerusalem and presented her with a special message of commemoration signed by the entire government of Israel as a tribute of Israel's appreciation for Tom's work, for the friendship between America and the State of Israel. I understand that this is the first AIPAC Policy Conference without Tom and he is sorely missed by us all. I would also like to use this platform to mention another close friend of mine and Tom's who passed away this week; Yosef Tommy Lapid, former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Justice. Both Tom and Tommy grew up in Hungary, lived on the same street, one block apart from each other; they were both Holocaust survivors saved by the legendary Wallenberg. Tommy was an almost permanent fixture in Israeli public life. He was an articulately sharp and courageous publicist and politician but above all he was a true and loyal friend. The void left by these great men in their passing is as deep as the impact they made in their lives. Ladies and gentlemen, as you know all too well the situation between Israel and its neighbors, the Palestinians and the other Arab States is sensitive and complex. My responsibility as Prime Minister and that of every government in Israel is first and foremost for the security of its citizens. And we will never compromise on this principle.

Israel will never capitulate to terrorism or show weakness in the face of evil. Our strength in this regard is unequivocal and is completely on a par with the policies of President Bush and of the US Congress. We will continue to exercise our inalienable right to defend ourselves against all acts of aggression and we will prevail. At the same time, we will never abandon our efforts to achieve peace and

reconciliation with our neighbors, as we truly believe that only real peace can ultimately provide the security we all deserve. While we actively pursue peace we cannot ignore the numerous pitfalls on the path to peace and those forces in the region which seek to sabotage any hope of peace between Israel and its neighbors. The most serious and imminent threat to global security and stability is undoubtedly Iran. Iran is the world's largest exporter of terrorism, a fundamentalist dictatorship, motivated by utter contempt for the values represented by the free world and an uninhibited ambition to achieve military superiority and regional hegemony. It openly calls for the elimination of Israel and actively seeks nuclear capabilities to enable to translate its sinister plans into action. Iran's fingerprints are evident in almost every terrorist organization across the Middle East from Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hezbollah, Iran's major protégé receives its directive ammunitions and finances directly from Tehran with the help of Syria and is actively engaged in torpedoing any chance of calm in Lebanon. Its longstanding record as a ruthless terrorist organization has earned Hezbollah a place of honor on almost every list of global terrorist organizations. I urge you to work together with us to include Hezbollah in the terrorist list of the European Union and encourage other countries to do the same. The Iranian threat must be stopped by all possible means.

International, economic, and political sanctions on Iran as crucial as they may be are only an initial step and must be dramatically increased. Iran's defiance of international Resolutions and its continued tactics of deception and denial leave no doubt as to the urgent need for more drastic and robust measures. The sanctions must be clearly defined and religiously enforced. Any willingness to overlook Iran's violations or justify Iran's questionable tactics will immediately be interpreted as a sign of weakness and will only encourage them to proceed with more vigor. The international community has a duty and responsibility to clarify to Iran through drastic measures that their repercussions of the continued pursuit of nuclear weapons will be devastating. The sanctions initiated by the UN are of immense importance as they represent a unified stand by a large land of nations. But sanctions should also be initiated by individual countries which have dealings with Iran. Each and every country must understand that the long-term cost of a nuclear Iran greatly outweighs the short-term benefit of doing business with Iran.

While Iran may be a large oil exporter it imports almost half of its refined oil productions; sanctions can be imposed on the export of gasoline to Iran and they can be imposed on countries which refine gasoline for Iran.

Governments should announce that Iranian businessmen are no longer welcome in their countries and that funds arriving from or channeled to Iran should not be transferred through their banks. Israel and the United States have long understood the acute danger embodied in a nuclear Iran and are working closely in a concerted coordinated effort to prevent Iran from becoming nuclear. Israel will not tolerate the possibility of a nuclear Iran and neither should any other country in the free world.

Dear friends, on May 21 Israel and Syria simultaneously announced the start of negotiations for comprehensive peace under the auspices of Turkey based on the principles of the 1991 Madrid Conference. Syria is currently a threat to regional stability. But if it ultimately makes the choice to have peace relations with Israel for which it will have to disengage from its allies in the axis of evil this will constitute a drastic strategic shift in the entire Middle East. Iran's negative response to this process can serve as an indication of the benefits embodied in it. Peace between Israel and Syria is a clear Israeli interest. But it is also a Syrians' interest. I know all too well the fears, suspicions, and criticisms which have always surrounded the Israeli Syria negotiations. And I do not take them lightly. I can only assure you that any future agreement if and when it is reached will be backed by all the necessary security guarantees and that I will never compromise on anything which could undermine Israel's security or vital interests.

While the negotiations with Syria are only at the very initial stage the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians are continuing and intensive. The Annapolis Meeting in November 2007 initiated by President Bush launched this process and outlined the principles underlying it and we have been proceeding on this basis ever since. The current leadership in the Palestinian Authority headed by President Mahmoud Abbas presents a rare opportunity to achieve an agreement. President Abbas and his government recognize Israel's right to live in security and are as committed as we are to achieving peace. They know full well that the path of terrorism only condemns the Palestinian people to misery and hopelessness and have a genuine desire to see a Palestinian State living side-by-side with Israel in peace and security. I'm whole-heartedly convinced that we are at a critical crossroads and that this opportunity must not be missed.

My obligation as Prime Minister is to explore every avenue to reach an understanding and I truly believe that now perhaps for the first time ever it is attainable. President Abbas and I have met many times over the past two years and the two teams have been meeting on a weekly basis in a serious effort to achieve a historic breakthrough in the course of 2008. The negotiations cover all outstanding issues

between us. The agreement if and when it is reached will reflect the vision introduced to the world by President Bush in June 2002 and its implementation will be subject to the road map and it is clear that security will always come first.

Israel entered this bilateral process with the Palestinians in good faith and with a genuine willingness to make the necessary compromises. The time for both parties to make difficult decisions is soon approaching. I believe that the leadership of Israel and the people of Israel are ready for it, and I hope that when the moment of truth finally arrives the Palestinian leadership will respond to the challenge. The moderate responsible Arab States headed by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States could play an important role in this process. Three nations which want to promote peace and which fully recognize the direct threat to them posed by a nuclear Iran and by foreign and domestic extremism now have a golden opportunity to support a process of normalization and reconciliation with Israel, which will isolate Iran and the extremists and help foil their pursuit of regional dominance. I hope they will choose to take a constructive part and create an environment which is conducive to the peace negotiations currently taking place between Israel and its neighbors. A clear distinction must be made between the Palestinian Authority headed by President Abbas and the Hamas terrorist organization operating and controlling Gaza.

Israel has never nor will it ever negotiate with Hamas as long as it refuses to accept the three principles set forth by the international community. The reality on Israel's southern border is intolerable. Some of which you could hear tonight and understand and I believe feel how deep it is, how unacceptable it is, how unbearable it is; tens of thousands of innocent Israeli citizens live daily in constant fear and anxiety under a barrage of missile--missiles serving as pawns in a cruel malicious game of roulette played by the Hamas and its cronies in the Gaza Strip. While we have no desire to see the uninvolved Palestinian population in Gaza suffer we will do everything to avoid any humanitarian crisis in Gaza because we are not fighting against uninvolved people; we are fighting against terrorist, killers, murderers, Kasam rocket shooters, and we will not stop this fight.

We cannot be expected to accept the situation that no other nation in the world would tolerate. You have just seen and heard it from the brave people of Sderot. Sderot and the other communities in the south of Israel have over the past seven years suffered the largest number of missiles launched from the Gaza Strip. These good, hard-working citizens demonstrate incredible courage and fortitude in their daily struggle to conduct seemingly normal lives in an impossible

incomprehensible situation. And they are--they truly are an inspiration to us all.

Allow me to address myself directly to the glorious representatives of the United States Senate and Congress. I turn to each and every one of you and I'd like to ask you; if one city, one small city in your State, in your District was bombed not even on a daily basis but just once with one single missile what would you do? Would you not demand that your government stand up immediately and take the necessary action to defend your citizens? Would you not expect the entire international community to unequivocally denounce the group responsible for these atrocities? Would you not look to your government to provide a solution? I know what you all feel; I know what you all believe in. I know that you all feel like us and stand with us and with the people of Sderot and the other communities near Sderot.

Israel will not be deterred from a large military operation in Gaza if and when we come to the conclusion that this is the best way to restore calm on our southern border.

But the fact that no such operation has yet taken place does not imply that we are not taking action. The battle against terrorists in Gaza is a daily and continuous one; every day the government and the security forces weigh all possible alternatives and make a choice which we believe is the wisest and most effective. Hopefully our dialogue with the Palestinians will ripen into an agreement which will clearly show the Palestinians public that there is an alternative to violence and that the key to living in prosperity, honor and dignity lies in reconciliation with Israel.

Ladies and gentlemen, friends of Israel, in the 60 years since our founding we transformed a barren land into a prosperous State and turned swamps and deserts into moderns flourishing cities. We have founded a strong and vibrant democracy, absorbed millions of Jews, immigrants from across the globe and created a world-class ground-breaking economy. All this was achieved despite wars and continued threats to Israel's security. However, the great mission of attaining peace with our Palestinian neighbors and the other Arab States is still ahead of us. Recently Jews around the world read in the Weekly Torah portion about God's decree to the Jewish people. After explaining the answering prosperity should the Jewish people follow his Commandments God declares, I will provide peace in the land and you will lie down with nothing to frighten you; Vayikra Chapter 26: Verse 6. A classical interpretation of the order of these passages suggests that while prosperity follows commitment to God's Commandments, its value is meaningless if there is no peace. According to God's precedence peace is of greater value than all material things

combined. We must believe that peace is a possibility and strive to make it a reality.

And I assure you that I will spare no energy and leave no stone unturned in my efforts to secure a better future for the people of Israel in the Jewish State. This is my duty; this is my obligation; and this will be my contribution to my people--security and peace.

I also take this opportunity to stress once again that the government of Israel will spare no effort to bring our three captive sons home. Gilad Shalit, who is being held by Hamas in Gaza and Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev who were captured by Hezbollah almost two years ago--this is the State of Israel's absolute commitment and I'm sure that you all share our strong desire to see them home safely.

The AIPAC Policy Conference is an ideal platform for me to express on behalf of the people of Israel my admiration and gratitude to a remarkable friend, President George W. Bush. Without--without the President's personal involvement the bilateral process between Israel and the Palestinians may never have progressed. Yet despite his desire to see peace in the region, the President never expected Israel to compromise its security. His recent visit to Israel on the occasion of our 60th anniversary and his inspiring memorable speech at the Knesset were the ultimate expression of America's bipartisan unshakable commitment to Israel's security and well-being. The people of Israel will always remember, appreciate and cherish President Bush's understanding, friendship and support.

Ladies and gentlemen, given the recent political developments in Israel of which I am sure you are all aware I hesitated as to whether it was the right time and the right thing to leave everything behind and meet with you today. I promise you; I didn't hesitate for too long. Your friendship to Israel, your dedication to consolidating this strategic bond between Israel and the United States and your steadfast commitment to Israel's security and welfare have all inspired me. Israeli politics as I'm also sure some of you are well aware of is accustomed to all kinds of trials and tribulations but your love and support for the State of Israel provides a powerful foundation as solid rock on which we know we can always rely in good times and in times of crisis.

One of the most fundamental pillars of Israel's national security is its alliance with the United States and you have dedicated your lives to insuring that not only will this alliance never weaken or fail but that it will grow stronger and deeper. I thank you for giving me this opportunity to address you this evening. When I see all of you here I know that my country is truly blessed. Thank you.