

Sen. John Kerry (D-MA)

AIPAC Policy Conference 2009

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Sen. John Kerry: Thank you so much. Thank you, Bob, for that generous introduction, and thank you for your special friendship to our family, to my personally.

And I'd also like to say a special thank you to Howard Kohr and Howard Friedman.

I think theme here is that relationships matter, and let me tell you, in their cases, they really have mattered. They've been wonderful friends, extraordinary advocates, and I think them for their work, as I know you do.

Also -- I also want to thank AIPAC's outgoing president, David Victor, and President-Elect Lee Rosenberg.

I asked Lee how he won for president and I didn't. And he said, "Well, John, it helps, first of all, that I'm from Chicago." And, second, he said, "I did really well with the Jewish vote." So, anyway, I congratulate him, and very much look forward to working with him.

And it's my privilege to be here with my very close friends for many, many years, way back to the 1970's, Vice President Joe Biden, my predecessor on the Foreign Relations Committee. Joe has -- Vice President Joe has always stood firmly with Israel, and I'll tell you what, you can count on Vice President Joe Biden and President Barack Obama in the days ahead.

I want to offer a particularly warm welcome to all of you here, to some 6,500 people from over 50 states and 60 countries at this conference. And -- and to the 1,000-plus students out there, especially -- I should say to the 1,000- plus students in exile way over there. And especially the 196 delegates and students from Massachusetts.

To the chagrin of many of you here, I know, but, at least to our pleasure, the Red Sox beat the Yankees last night, so -- now I'm really getting into sectarian warfare.

Let me just say it is great to be here among friends, and I really mean this. When this conference met a year ago, we were in the heat of presidential primary, and the Dow was hovering around 13,000. So it's an understatement to remind everybody that things change. And this year's AIPAC conference arrives at a moment of momentous change.

Israel has just sworn in a new prime minister, someone I've known for a long time and have the pleasure of meeting almost every time I go there when he was in or out of office. And America has a new president barely past his first hundred days. So leaders, we know, change. Times may

change. But one thing we know: America's support for Israel's dream and for Israel's security, that will never change.

This -- this is the -- this is the promise -- this is the promise made by every president from Harry Truman to Barack Obama. America and Israel -- and you know this. You've heard this from people, I think you feel it. It doesn't come as a matter of politics. It's a matter of gut and heart. America and Israel are now and always will be partners in a special relationship. Israel is more than just an ally and a fellow democracy.

We share the bonds of faith and freedom and friendship. We share an interest in a stable, secure and peaceful Middle East. And we share in the belief that we are strongest when we stand behind our common values and when we stand together. Just like America, Israel has been a place of refuge for the tired and the poor, huddled masses of Holocaust survivors traveling by moonlight in makeshift boats, victims of Soviet oppression yearning to breathe free, the dramatic airlifts of Ethiopia's Beta Israel, and even a few Jews from Boston, Massachusetts, all have come to Israel's shores, and all have learned for themselves what the writer Amos Oz meant when he called Israel a dream come true.

It has been my privilege these past 25 years to visit Israel more times than I can count. I've walked through the quiet neighborhoods and sacred spaces of Jerusalem and the high-tech bustle of downtown Tel Aviv. So I can tell you from the history buried in every hill of the Galilee to brand new solar panels popping up across the Negev, Israel is a place that never fails to amaze.

We admire Israel for a democracy as spirited as anywhere in the world. We admire Israel for the heroism of giants like Yitzhak Rabin who, as a young man, risked his life in war, then, as an older man, gave his life for peace. And we admire -- and we admire Israel for the closeness of a community where one family's anguish over a signal kidnapped soldier is shared by an entire nation.

I met with Gilad Shalit's father, Noam, last week. And I will tell you, when I was in Syria, I raised his case, as I did in Cairo, with all of those that I could. And as a parent, I share his anguish, but I'll tell you I am confident the day will come when Galid is returned to his family and to the land that he loves.

But of course -- but of course, Israel needs more than our admiration and sympathy. Israel needs our support. And I will do everything I can as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to ensure that the 30 billion (dollars) in security assistance that Congress pledged to Israel is delivered in full. America -- will continue our military aid, and Israel will keep its military strength.

But as we all know -- but as we all know, AIPAC's concerns don't end with aid to Israel. The Jewish people gave us the phrase "tikkun olam," "to heal the world." And today I want to thank AIPAC for your help in achieving an American foreign aid budget that allows us to tackle big challenges such as global hunger, global climate change and global disease.

As you may know, some in Congress recently tried to cut \$4 billion from the foreign aid budget. And given the tough economic environment, we were facing a hard fight to get those funds restored. Hours before the vote, AIPAC kicked into gear, weighed in, and started working the phones -- I might add, at the same time, the rock star Bono was making the rounds of the Hill. And so, ladies and gentleman, with a one-two punch like that on our side, our opponents didn't stand a chance.

Today -- today, hungry people will eat and sick people will get life-saving medicine in part because AIPAC knew its mission didn't end with Israel. So thank you, AIPAC, for understanding that, and being part of that effort.

Because "tikkun olam" is an American value, too, we have responsibilities of our own. We need to reach out to the world, and stand strong against the cruel sting of bigotry anywhere and everywhere that it rears its ugly head. Jewish history is too full of painful reminders that words of hatred left unchallenged often become acts of hatred.

Recently, a conference against racism became a stage for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to slander the world's only Jewish state. And the president of the United States was right to boycott the Durban II racism conference in Geneva.

But I'll tell you -- I'll tell you, though, while listening to some of his comments and to see people burst into applause was a vivid reminder that our fight was far from over. I was, nevertheless -- and I hope you were, too -- encouraged to see dozens of delegates vote with their feet and storm out in protest.

Now, too many -- too many people in the day-to-day currents of life outside of this room don't realize the reality of violent anti-Semitism even in a place like Venezuela, where a synagogue was attacked at gunpoint and defaced with anti-Semitic slurs. In an interconnected world, anti-Semitism that goes unanswered anywhere is a threat to all of us.

I have felt this sense of vulnerability in Israel, too. I recently took a short helicopter ride with Tzipi Livni from Jerusalem to the southern Israel town of Sderot. Looking down on the farms and forests, it struck me that David Ben-Gurion's dream of making the desert bloom has come true. But from the air, it's almost unmistakable. It is unmistakable how small Israel is, how close its people are forced to live to adversaries. And you could see that, too, in the rocket casings piled up in the Sderot left by the thousands, those rockets fired from Gaza these last eight years.

When the sirens of Sderot start to sound, people have just 15 seconds to find safety. I heard of children in the second grade who had spent literally every day in their lives never more than 15 seconds from danger. Fifteen seconds, ladies and gentlemen. No child should live that way.

That same day -- that same day, I visited a town just across the border in Gaza, and I delivered the same message in Sderot. If terrorists in Quincy, Massachusetts were launching rockets into Boston aimed at civilians, and did so over eight years, we would have long since had to put a stop to it -- just as the Israelis were forced finally to respond. I said in Gaza -- I said in Gaza

point blank the rockets have got to stop, not in a month, not in a year, but right now, and I say that again. That is the road to peace.

We also know too well that the support for these militants comes from a number of places, but especially from Iran, the source of so many of the dangers that Israel and the region face today. Most troubling of all is the real prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran.

Every Israel leader has made it clear to me these past years that they view a nuclear-armed Iran as an existential threat, and I believe that is true. And when a government pursuing nuclear capability asks its people to imagine a world without Israel, we must take that threat seriously.

A nuclear-armed Iran would embolden Hamas and unleash Hezbollah. A nuclear-armed Iran could spark a nuclear arms race in the world's most dangerous neighborhood, as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Kuwait and others follow suit. And when we say that a nuclear-armed Iran is unacceptable, we mean it.

President Obama -- President Obama has said that he wants his administration to begin direct talks with Iran, and I believe it is important to give that strategy a chance. The reality is that the old Iran policy simply didn't work. Red line after red line was crossed until Iran manufactured enough low-enriched uranium to eventually develop a nuclear weapon if it chooses. And Iran learned because of the red lines that weren't enforced that there was no significant price to be paid for crossing those lines.

I believe that when we have engaged effectively with hostile nations in the past, we did so fortified by moral authority, committed allies and the strongest military in the world. That is exactly how we should engage Iran today -- not to accept the unacceptable, but to make sure that Iran never gets a nuclear bomb.

We all know -- we all know -- I know the president knows, the vice president knows, I know -- that outreach alone is not a strategy. If diplomacy is to work, it must be backed by the prospect of tough, escalating multilateral sanctions strong enough to actually change behavior. Greater Russian and Chinese cooperation must be a top priority. And demonstrating that we've made a legitimate attempt at across-the-border diplomacy is the best way, ultimately, to enlist them should tougher action be needed down the road.

And the bottom line is the world needs to agree on an enforceable red line. And once we've agreed, we need to enforce it.

One place to start turning up the pressure on Iran is in Syria. When the war broke out in Gaza, my friends, remember the Syrians were talking indirectly to Israel, and doing so over the objections of Iran. For all of our justifiable grievances, it benefits America, it benefits Syria, and it benefits Israel if President Assad does improve Syria's behavior and looks West for new relationships. None of that can be taken at face value, but a prudent, thoughtful administration is duty-bound to put it to the test.

Frankly, the rising threat of Iran has also presented unexpected new opportunities for peace. I believe that. Arabs leaders in Cairo, Amman and Riyadh are actually more worried about Iran today than they are worried about Israel. Whereas once the Arab world voted unanimously for the "three no's" -- no dialogue with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no peace with Israel -- there are now three very different no's, which dominate many of the discussions in the region. And they are no's that AIPAC can get behind: no Iranian meddling, no Iranian dominance, and above all, no Iranian nukes.

This -- this I believe, represents a fundamental shift. I've met with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah of Jordan, President Mubarak, almost every leader in the region, and I can tell you that their concerns are real, and they have changed. It is a fundamental shift, and our challenge is to translate the new dynamics into a tangible progress that makes Israel stronger in the region and moves us closer to peace.

One of the reasons that peace talks at Camp David failed in 2000 was a lack of support from Arab states. Now, for the first time, though, the Arab Peace Initiative -- through it, every Arab country has agreed to the basic formulation of land for peace, recognition of the state of Israel and normalization of relations. Now, of course, Arabs cannot wait for Israel to make all the sacrifices before they actually begin improving relations, and they should start doing so right now.

That's why I believe we need to expand this initiative into a regional road map, one that fleshes out the promises of peace between Israel and the entire Arab world. Israelis and Palestinians have the Quartet's road map. But a regional road map would sign all of the key players on to a series of specific steps and commitments towards normalizing relations, and it would give Israel something it needs from its neighbors -- real accountability.

The first step for Arab leaders is to tell Hamas the same thing that I said in Gaza -- the rockets must stop. Going forward, Arab leaders need to take reciprocal steps to demonstrate that they are sincere in their wish for peace, and begin to legitimize Israel in the eyes of their people by treating Israel like a normal country, ending the boycott, letting El Al fly over their countries, and meeting Israeli leaders. And most of all, the poisonous rhetoric emanating from too many Arab TV stations and too many preachers' pulpits has got to stop. Books in the hands of schoolchildren must tell history as it happened, and show maps with countries as they really exist. You cannot make peace out of one side of your mouth, and preach hate out of the other.

Ultimately, it is the Israelis and the Palestinians themselves who must reach an agreement that they can live with. Here's what I know -- the people of Israel want peace, they deserve peace, and America is committed to help achieve peace.

Nothing will do more to silence the skeptics, and win over the silent majorities of peace-loving people everywhere; nothing will do more to ensure Israel's long-term security -- that Israel's children have a thriving country 10, 20, and 50 years from now. Nothing will ensure more, I believe, than two states, one Israeli, one Palestinian, non-militarized, living side by side in peace and security.

The big question is: how do we get there? Now, I understand why Israelis and those who care about Israel have doubts about the peace process. We have seen too much process, and too little peace. Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon, only to face Hezbollah missiles. Israel withdrew from Gaza, only to face Hamas rockets. The Israelis are not about to let the same thing happen in the West Bank, and nor should they. And now they look across at a divided Palestinian society, and ask as they have for a number of years -- and I've heard this question so many times -- "Who am I supposed to make peace with?"

The truth is that for years we have all talked about the lack of a Palestinian partner for peace -- one that can deliver for its people, win a battle for the hearts and minds with the extremists, and take real steps to ensure Israel's security. But it is also true, my friends -- and I say this as a friend -- none of us have done nearly enough to make that entity a reality. With Palestinian elections on the horizon, we must act now to strengthen those Palestinians willing to make tough sacrifices for peace. Hamas has already won one election. We cannot allow them to win another. That's one reason why I believe that improving the daily life and freedom of movement for Palestinians in the West Bank will also help protect Israel.

We also need to find creative ways to deliver humanitarian aid and reconstruction assistance to the people of Gaza without empowering Hamas in the process. We can't make the mistake in Gaza in 2009 that was made in letting Hezbollah and Iran rebuild southern Lebanon in 2006. Half of Gaza is under 18 years old, and if there is no light at the end of the tunnel for these children and few prospects for a normal life, then -- believe me -- they will remain susceptible to Hamas' ideology of hate.

Obviously, the Palestinians themselves must do enormous work to uphold their end of the bargain. Even as we work with the international community to provide more support, we need to ask more in return. It's no secret that Fatah lost the 2006 election to Hamas in part because of a widely held perception that they were corrupt and inefficient. Now, much progress has been made since then, but Fatah still needs to earn back the respect of its own people, and they need to demonstrate that they are willing to crack down on terror in the West Bank.

Israel, too, must take hard steps towards the path to peace. And nothing will do more to show Israel's commitment to making peace than freezing new settlement activity. We will defend Israel's security unflinchingly. We always have, and we always will. But the fact is that settlements make it more difficult for Israel to protect its citizens. New settlements, especially in sensitive areas like E-1, don't just fragment a future Palestinian state. They also fragment what the Israeli Defense Forces must defend. They undercut President Abbas, and strengthen Hamas by convincing everyday Palestinians that there is no reward for moderation. And they empower the enemies of peace in the region.

I know that lasting peace with the Palestinians does not come easily. But I also know that if we want security for Israel -- and we desperately do -- only peace can bring, and we must try now because it is a simple reality that the window of opportunity for a two-state solution is fast closing. And if the children I saw in Sderot and those I saw in Gaza can hope for themselves, if they can persevere for a better future, then we must all help them get there.

That is an obligation that I felt long before I first went to Israel, my friends. Since then, I've stood on top of the Golan Heights, walked the border with Lebanon, sat in a shelter in Kiryat Shemona where children had to hide from Katyusha rockets. I passed by an Israeli street corner within hours of a lethal attack, and visited the remains of a nightclub in Tel Aviv where people were enjoying their youth one minute, and had it snatched away the next. And I have flown an Israeli jet in Israeli airspace and narrowly avoided a border-crossing into Egypt because the airspace was so narrow. I understand this challenge. All of these experiences have created an indelible impression of Israel's great journey and of the daily struggle of everyday Israelis to live safe and normal lives.

As I prepared to come here today, I found myself thinking about my first trip to Israel twenty five years ago. I'd only been in the Senate for a few months when a small group of Jewish friends from Massachusetts convinced me to visit Israel with ADL. They were led by my good friend Lenny Zakim, whose commitment to fighting discrimination lives on through the Leonard Zakim Bridge in Boston. Lenny wanted me to get the facts, he wanted me to understand Israel's passion, and he wanted me to see and hear its remarkable story up close.

Lenny was doing the same kind of advocacy that so many of you will do later today -- talking to Congressmen, exercising your rights and responsibilities and making your voices heard.

I have so many memories of that first trip, but the strongest of all is standing on the mountaintop at Masada in the very place where, thousands of years ago, the people of Israel gave their lives for the dream of a Jewish homeland.

And we looked out, this small group who had been talking at length about Josephus -- Flavius' recounting of the events. And we looked out at the vast desert plain where young Israeli soldiers swear a new oath against the test of history to defend Israel against new threats, new weapons and new challenges.

We stood at the very end of cliff all together, and on the instructions from our guide, Yavin Roman, we shouted across the chasm, across the desert, the words "Am Yisrael Chai, Israel lives!" And across the silence, we listened as voices bounced off the mountain, and came back at us. Faintly we heard the echo of the souls of those who had perished. "Am Yisrael Chai!" came back, and spoke to us, "The State of Israel lives. The people of Israel live! Israel lives!" The faces may have changed, and the era has changed, but the message today is the same -- "Am Yisrael Chai!" "Israel lives!" And with our work together, we will guarantee those words live forever. Thank you for the privilege of being with you today.