

Sen. Richard Durbin (D-IL)

AIPAC Policy Conference 2009

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Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL): I want to thank Bob Asher for that generous introduction. This is my 28th AIPAC policy conference. I came to my first one with Bob Asher. In my left pocket were all of my campaign cards and I kept the right pocket open for business cards that I could collect, walking around introducing myself. To those that are here tonight in that same posture, this is a good place to be and I recommend it.

Five years ago I brought a young man with me to the AIPAC policy conference. He was only a state senator in the state of Illinois at that time. He already had a lot of friends because he was from Chicago. He's done very well for himself.

I just have to tell you that I believe that AIPAC has always been a trusted ally and friend from my earliest days in politics. But whether it's Israel or Dick Durbin, no one could have a better friend than Bob Asher. He is a terrific man. I am honored to call him and Mary Jane my close friends.

My congratulations to Lee Rosenberg, incoming president of AIPAC. Rosie, congratulations. It seems like a lot of people from Illinois are becoming presidents and I kind of like that. I wish you the best.

My best as well to outgoing president David Victor, your executive director Howard Kohr and all my colleagues at Congress.

Not far from where we're meeting, in the center of the nation's Capitol is the Rotunda. It was completed in 1824 for a visit by Lafayette. It has become the symbolic heart of our nation's capital. The highest honor we can pay the fallen in our nation is to recognize their singular contributions by permitting their remains to lie in state in that majestic hall. Eleven presidents, beginning with Abraham Lincoln, have been accorded that honor so that their lives would be remembered.

Two weeks ago there was another moment of remembrance in the Capitol Rotunda. President Barack Obama and 100 of us were in a solemn gathering recalling the victims of the Holocaust. Sitting next to me was Irene Boyorski [ph] of Maryland, a survivor who escaped Hungary. And next to her, Teddish Donkavich [ph], a Catholic from Poland who risked his life to help five Polish Jews hiding in the woods to avoid capture and certain death.

I had the honor of lighting one of the six memorial candles with those two brave witnesses. When Elie Wiesel spoke to us that day, he noted that the survivors and the righteous who saved Jews from the death camps are all advancing in years. Soon, he said, most will be gone. And

when that sad inevitability occurs, Elie Wiesel asked this question: Who will be left to tell the story? I thought about that question. I wrote it down and I thought about it as I prepared these remarks.

Elie Wiesel is a brilliant, thoughtful man who has written hauntingly about the Holocaust. He knows that his written and spoken words will live long after we are all gone. He knows as well that newsreels and documentaries depicting the horrors of Auschwitz and Buchenwald and all the atrocities will stand as irrefutable proof of the evil. He knows that films like *Schindler's List* will remain, as will the most powerful proof of all: the courageous recorded testimonies of the survivors themselves.

But I think Elie Wiesel's question goes far beyond asking what historical records and evidence will endure for scholars in future generations. His question was really more basic; who will take the time to remember? Who will preserve the memory of those who perished? Who will make their suffering relevant after the survivors among us are gone?

We know tonight that there is one thing on this earth which will remain as a testimony to those 6 million who died in the Holocaust. There is one thing that will always reflect the solemn, sacred memory of the Jewish people who suffered and died, there is one thing that embodies the promise "never again" in a timeless way: it is a vision of a dream, of a refuge, of a homeland. It was born in battle and for more than 60 years it has survived through courage, resolve, and the support of its friends around the world, friends like those who gather here tonight.

On May 14th, 1948 (sic), with the surrounding Arab states threatening war, the nation of Israel was born. Eleven minutes later -- eleven minutes later -- a record by Washington political time -- President Harry Truman, on behalf of the United States of America, officially recognized the new state of Israel.

From that moment to this day, generations of Americans have pledged that Israel will survive and today that pledge is renewed in our time by our generation. In recent months both Israel and America have seen one of the miracles of democracy: the peaceful transfer of power. In these times of challenge and change one thing that will never change is America's commitment to the safety, security, and long-term survival of Israel. We say to our friends in Israel, you are not alone. America stands with you now and always in your struggle for peace.

Under President Barack Obama, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and special envoy Senator George Mitchell, the quest for a lasting peace between Israel and its neighbors will be the highest priority. The threats to Israel's survival are real, from the crude terrorist bombs in the streets to the Katyusha rockets aimed at its neighborhoods, from the kidnapping of its soldiers to the threat of nuclear weapons in Iran.

If Iran continues to defy the demands of the international community to suspend its enrichment of uranium, the U.S. must impose increased sanctions and work with other nations and the U.N. to prevent a nuclear armed Iran.

In the last Congress I sponsored the Iran Counter-Proliferation Act of 2007 and supported then-Senator Obama's fight for the Iran Sanctions Enabling Act. And as Bob mentioned tonight, I've joined in co-sponsoring the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act.

We cannot stand by while a state that funds terrorism, a state whose leader denies the truth of the Holocaust and calls for Israel's destruction, works to acquire nuclear weapons. And we will not stand by while a steady supply of weapons and rockets flow into the Hamas-controlled Gaza and rain down on Israel's people.

We support the effort of President Abbas and responsible Palestinian leaders to oppose Hamas. We believe the Palestinian people should have a safe and sovereign land, but not at the expense of the safety and sovereignty of Israel. We believe that Palestinians deserve a voice in deciding their own destiny, but that voice cannot be the roar of a suicide bomb killing innocent children.

I support the agreement to provide \$30 billion in security assistance to Israel over 10 years because peace investments in Israel's security are investments in America's security.

But one of the gravest threats to Israel's security and long-term survival is not found in weapons laboratories or munitions laboratories. It is here. The Middle East and North Africa are the driest regions on earth. Israel and Syria are both parched from multi-year droughts that have left their water supplies dangerously low. More than 90 percent of the water in aquifers under Gaza is too polluted to drink. The water scarcity in Jordan was already a serious problem but Jordan has seen its water shortage grow dramatically worse in recent years due to the massive influx of 600,000 Iraqi War refugees.

The water crisis is not limited to the Middle East; it's a global crisis. I first became aware of the seriousness of this crisis when my good friend, the man whose seat I now hold in the Senate, the late Senator Paul Simon. He was a wise man who saw solutions before most people even saw the problems. Solving the global water crisis was his last great cause. He wrote a book about it 11 years ago and in his book he recounted a meeting he had with other members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee with Yitzhak Rabin shortly after Rabin became prime minister.

Rabin told the senators, "You probably didn't know that before I entered the military -- he said -- I was a water engineer." And then this water expert and champion of peace made a prediction that startled the senators. This is what Rabin said: "If we solve every other problem in the Middle East but do not satisfactorily resolve the water problem, our region will explode. Peace will not be possible."

In 1979, after signing the peace treaty with Israel, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat said his nation would never go to war again except to protect its water resources. Jordan's King Hussein identified water as the only reason that might lead his nation to war.

More than 60 percent of the region's water flows through rivers that cross at least one national border. Disagreements over the use of those waters are a constant source of friction, but it doesn't have to be. There's a better way. Water, the most basic commodity for human survival, can become another existential threat to Israel or it can bring Israel and its neighbors together in a

common struggle and create a sense of shared destiny that is essentially to any genuine and lasting peace.

I recently introduced a bill, the Paul Simon Water for the World Act, that would help bring clean water and basic sanitation to 100 million people in some of the world's poorest and most parched regions, from the Middle East to sub-Saharan Africa. It would also support regional partnerships to solve the global water crisis.

Israel has so much to offer to this cause. Israel's water technology exports have doubled since 2005, with 200 Israeli water companies exporting water management, recycling, and purification, irrigation, desalinization, and safety technologies to over 100 countries. The United Nations recently released a report naming Israel as the world's most efficient recycled water user.

Israel's very existence has been a series of miracles. I believe that the nation that has created a vibrant democracy and a thriving economy in the Mid East can make the desert bloom. They can help lead other nations to solve their regional water crisis and in doing so create a great miracle of a secure and lasting peace.

In this world Israel must be strong and its friends must be ready. So long as Israel's flag still flies, Elie Wiesel's question will be answered. Who will be left to tell this story? Israel and its friends will tell that story so those 6 million people will never be forgotten, so the Jewish people across the world will always have a homeland, so the dream of freedom will never die.