

House Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer at AIPAC Policy Conference 2011

Transcript

Eric, it's so good to be in this small group of friends. I am pleased to be here with all of you. I'm pleased to be here with my friend and colleague and partner, Eric Cantor, the majority leader.

Frankly, I'd like to trade titles with him, but notwithstanding that, our partnership is a good one. Howard Friedman, you noticed, he is my good friend. A little hyperbole never hurts. Lee Rosenberg, your president, who does such an extraordinary job of leadership; Michael Kassen, your president-elect; Howard Kohr, your extraordinary executive director; my good friends Jeff Snyder and David Cordish, who are from my own state; and of course, Shelley Berkley and there are a lot of colleagues here, but Shelley's right up front as always. And to Mike Oren, an extraordinary ambassador who just rightfully received a standing ovation.

The most remarkable journeys are often those we begin with a destination far from clear. That's the case of one of the most remarkable journeys ever recorded -- Abraham's journey to which the Jewish people traces its origin. Abraham was told only this, "Get up, leave your country, your people, and your father's house and go to the land I will show you." In other words, leave behind everything you know, take only what you can carry and walk by faith to a place you have never seen. That place, of course, because Israel. That man became the ancestor claimed by three great faiths. And it would have never happened if he had chosen to stay safe among what he knew, or if he demanded certainty about where he was going.

The great journeys, the ones that are told and retold never come with certainty. And that has been just as true of the life of the nation that in our own time grew on that land. Israel has rarely, if ever, known the certainty that other states know. In years like 1948, 1967, its very survival was in doubt. But Israel prevailed, survived, and yes, even thrived. And it must continue to do so.

In 1978, at Camp David, there was grave doubt that Israel and an Arab neighbor could ever make peace. But a critical peace was made. And today, this new era of Middle Eastern turmoil, the so-called Arab Spring is also an era of deep uncertainty. An era in which, try as we might to look into the future, so very little comes clear. But I am here secure in this faith. Israel will prevail and endure.

In times of uncertain and death, when we are called to leave the world we know, we hold on to all the more strongly to those things in our lives that are certain. Those things that are lasting, unshakable and true. That's true of men and women, and it's true of nations. And in the life of the state of Israel, we know of at least one fact that is and has always been certain -- its friendship with the United States of America.

That friendship has endured -- -- that friendship endured in peace as well as in war. It has lasted through 12 presidencies and 60 years of political change in the Congress and in the Knesset. It has endured differences and disagreements and has, in fact, been strengthened throughout those years. And we are here today to re-infirm it. Not only between ourselves, but to all the world as well. Our friendship is so certain because it is based on two pillars of shared interest and shared ideas.

As to interests, Israel and American [sic] strengthen one another by building on one another's economic innovations, by sharing intelligence and training, to keep our people safe from common global threats, and by fighting the scourge of terrorism and hatred. But just as importantly, shared ideals -- shared ideals when Americans look at Israel, we see a nation founded on the principles that have given our own nation life for more than two centuries.

Israel's declaration of independence expresses those ideals eloquently. And I quote, "The state of Israel will be based on freedom, justice and peace and envisaged by the prophets of Israel. It will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all of its inhabitants, irrespective of religion, race or sex." It goes on to say that it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture. It goes on and concludes it will safeguard the holy places of all religions.

I have seen Israel in times of celebration and times of sorrow, in times of confidence and times of doubt. But one lesson has been constant. Israelis are a people of deep reverence for the land of Israel and an extraordinary willingness and courage to serve its cause. Israelis can teach all of us what it means to love country and to risk all for its survival and success. I told Tzipi Livni that I would be visiting for the 12th time Israel this summer. And I know that I'll -- -- and in fact, I've had a number of people who are telling me they are going to visit with me. And we're glad to be with them.

I know that I will be traveling to a nation deeply unsure of what the future holds. Across the Middle East, we are witnessing convulsive change. And if we've learned anything, we've learned this. History never plays out with the sureness of history books. Its transformations can be chaotic and often frightening and dangerous. However, they can also be full of hope and apprehension in equal measure. We have seen the bravery of a young generation risking its life for universal freedoms. We've heard words like these from a protestor in Tahrir Square. He said this: "I'm here because everyone needs to feel like a free human being." That of course is what Israel provides alone in that quadrant of the world.

What an example Israel can be for those who seek to establish freedom and democracy in their own lands. However, we've also seen that bravery gunned down, over long nights of brutal repression in Damascus, Daraa and Benghazi from some quarters. We hear bright promises of a new era of Arab democracy. From others, we hear prudent warnings that extremism and radicalism love a vacuum of power. There is hope the regimes across the Middle East will be pressured to attend more closely to their people's grievances rather than using Israel as a convenient scapegoat.

There is also -- -- there is however also fear that despots will turn again to that scapegoating as they struggle to cling to power. What Prime Minister Netanyahu said of the uprising in Egypt holds true across the Middle East. Netanyahu said, "No one knows what the future will bring. Changing the status quo can definitely lead to a better outcome." This happened, he observed, two decades ago in Berlin, in Prague, in Bucharest. But he went on to say that change can also lead to worse outcomes -- worse for freedom, worse for human rights and worse for peace.

But as the leaders of our nations watch this unfolding history with a wary eye, we make this firm commitment to do everything in our power to ensure the security, safety and sovereignty of the state of Israel.

To ensure the survival of democracy in a region where its survival has always been at risk, where its light has shown all the more brightly for shining so often alone. The United States must maintain its commitment to the U.S.-Israeli Memorandum of Understanding, and to ensure that Israel's security -- -- and to ensure that Israel's security funding is provided in full. Eric Cantor and I have pledged to work together to achieve that end.

And the world must know this as well. As they saw the United States respond to the threats to citizens in Benghazi, surely they must be confident that the United States will respond in kind to any threatened assault on the people -- our brothers and sisters in Israel.

At a time when Iran's nuclear ambitions threaten the safety of all Israelis and the stability of the entire region and indeed the world, we must stand firm against the Tehran regime's nuclear pursuit. We must continue -- -- we must continue to stand by the strong sanctions and diplomatic pressure that are holding that dangerous threat back. President Obama takes that threat with the seriousness it deserves. He has resolutely led the global effort to stop it. And that effort must be successful. And I know Bill Daley, the chief of staff, will focus on that issue. Bill Daley, thank you very much for your leadership in that effort.

We must continue to remind the world of the disastrous global implications of a nuclear armed Iran and we must ramp up the pressure to prevent that outcome. And even at a time when the future of the peace process looks as uncertain as it has ever been, let us reassert our faith that there is only one just and secure outcome for Israelis and for Palestinians alike -- a future of two states for two peoples -- one, a homeland for the Jewish people, the other, a homeland for the Palestinian people, both living in peace and security with one another.

And if that peace and security are to exist, Israel's borders must be defensible and must reflect reality on the ground. The reconciliation of Hamas with Fatah puts the future in doubt to the detriment of the Palestinian people. But in the face of those who put their faith in violence, along with those who seek a peace that is imposed from outside, let us make this clear. Peace can only be achieved by a return to the negotiating table without preconditions.

I believe in Palestinian statehood. But I stand strongly against a solution that is either declared, either unilaterally or by an international body. Peace cannot be imposed. It must be negotiated. Ladies and gentlemen, we must speak with crystal clarity that we will not compromise or temporize with an alliance that includes terrorists and international criminals. That principle is enshrined in U.S. law, which I was proud to support. And in accordance with that law, we will not fund a government that fails to accept previous agreements and recognize the Jewish state of Israel's right to exist.

Robert Kennedy said to a group of students in South Africa, "Our future may lie beyond our vision, but it is not completely beyond our control." And he added, "It is the shaping impulse of America that neither fate nor time, nor the irresistible tides of history, but the work of our own hands matched to reason and principle that will determine our destiny."

Today, as then, the future is beyond our vision but let us meet it with confidence and resolve. When we are called to leave behind what we know, let us go bravely and willingly. Let's go with faith that the lasting things we carry with us will be more than enough to sustain us. Let us go with the conviction and in times like these are born the qualities of vigilance, public spirited, fidelity to purpose and principle, conviction and courage that make nations lastingly great. Israel is such a nation. America is such a nation. Together we are better.

While what tomorrow brings may be uncertain, let us confront those tomorrows with the certainty of our own immutable bond. Together, Israel and the United States have represented and fought to sustain the values for which so many in the Arab world now strive. Let us neither delude ourselves about the evil that exists in the hearts of too many, nor be dissuaded from responding to the good in the hearts of others. In these times, we come together as friends of Israel to share our apprehensions and our hopes, to share our predictions, our insights, our analysis, to discuss and debate, to do the work that is the heart of democracy and the secret of democracy's success.

And in these times of great flux, we can count on at least this blessing: What is certain, what is lasting, what is true stand out all the more brightly. And first among those facts is the unbreakable bond between our two nations. And from a foundation so strong and so deeply rooted, there is nothing we cannot endure together, nothing we cannot accomplish together. May God continue to bless the state of Israel and United States of America. Thank you very much.