

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid at AIPAC Policy Conference 2011

Transcript

We meet this year in the shadow of Israel's birthday, but our mood is not one of celebration. Our mood is one of caution and concern. Unease sits heavily on our shoulders. This week, as at no time in Israel's history, has her future faced such tension and such serious tests. Uncertainty awaits us on many fronts, and never in AIPAC's history have so many of you, leaders, advocates, students and concerned citizens, gathered to make your voices heard. Your tireless activism has made you an unparalleled force, not only in this town, but throughout the country and the world. It's not only your numbers or your passion that has made you effective and earned you the success you deserve. It's the virtue of your cause and the integrity of your conviction.

You're in the arena, in the fight, year after year. When the headwinds pick up, you push back even harder, and today, here, we are united, determined, demanding strength and success. We insist that not only Israel survives, but thrives. And I'm honored to stand before you this evening to say that like you, I stand with Israel always.

I'll make sure the United States stands with Israel every time. I will do this as majority leader of the United States Senate, and I'll do this in my most important job, as a senior Senator from the state of Nevada, the home to the fastest growing Jewish community in the country, a spirited, pro-Israel community, and the home to many AIPAC members here tonight, including my good friend, and the next Senator from the state of Nevada, Shelley Berkley.

I stand with Israel, the Congress stands with Israel, and America stands with Israel, because the values that have cast our histories are one and the same, and our futures will intertwine even more than our history has been.

You know, here are the values. You know them -- democracy, opportunity, justice, strength, security and self-defense, innovation, peace. These values fasten the unbreakable bond between the United States and the state of Israel. We also share a common confidence that the risks we take are right. Israel and America meet great challenges with the faith that we're fighting the good fight.

This month began with a daring mission the world will long remember. The raid that got bin Laden was unprecedented in its significance, but to those who know their history it was not unfamiliar. Thirty-five years earlier, in the summer of 1976, Israel showed the world how it's done. Many of you remember terrorists took a hijacked plane to Entebbe, Uganda, where they freed only the non-Jewish passengers. After days of deliberation, Israel's leaders decided to conduct its first ever mission outside the Middle East, far, far from home. The rescue was as dangerous as it was ingenious. The Israeli troops flew into Entebbe's airport under the cover of night. To deceive the guards on the ground, they drove to the terminal in a Mercedes and Land Rover motorcade identical to the one the Ugandan president would use to travel.

Less than an hour later, while Americans celebrated the bicentennial of our independence, more than 100 Jewish hostages discovered their freedom. The only troop Israel lost that day was Prime Minister Netanyahu's brave older brother, Yoni. Many of the elements of that Entebbe story sound familiar to the details we've heard in recent days about the raid that brought another hijacker to justice. Before both missions, intelligence services surveyed the targets, troops built and trained on an exact model before flying through the darkness to unfamiliar foreign terrain to what they had to do. The surprise mission was carried out with staggering speed and success.

All the while, it was kept under the highest secrecy, but these stunning operations have something much more important in common: In neither case was success a certainty, or really even a probability. Israel's leaders were far from confident the military strike would succeed in Entebbe. They wrestled with the tension and pressure and doubt. It was approved at last with hope, but also with a heavy heart, and three weeks ago, even as the helicopters were landing in that Pakistani compound, our troops were not certain that bin Laden was inside. America's leaders struggled with second and third guesses, but in the end, as in Entebbe before, decisive leadership led to definitive success.

In both cases, those who designed, ordered and carried out the mission operated on little more than circumstantial evidence. In other words, they acted on faith; the faith that their job is just and their duty is solemn -- the faith of Herzl, that tells us if we will it, it's no dream. So both nations decided the risks were worth taking, because neither Israel nor America tolerates the terrorism that stains our past. We don't give in to fear. We stand up for the honor of our nations and our people. When we're attacked, we will always remember, we will always fight back, and though it may take some time, we follow through.

Many nations take many risks. America and Israel, though, are the countries that make them count. We succeed. Americans and Israelis are the peoples who make possible the impossible. That's the spirits we need to recapture in the next pursuits of justice. The past six months have seen more remarkable change in the Middle East than any period in the past six decades, since the state of Israel was born. This young story has been one of democracy, of human rights, a story written by those who know the voice of the people is as valid as the voice of powerless, that it is just as legitimate and can be just as loud.

Today, the Middle East and North Africa have captured the world's attention. Witnesses of history around the globe are routing for democracy. But while we celebrate progress, and as the Arab spring turns to summer, we must vigilantly protect the stability, security and support of the state of Israel.

And no one should forget the vast majority of the Arab world is still not free, but for 63 years, a strong, vibrant democracy has flowered in the unlikeliest of deserts. It's a democracy dedicated to progress and prosperity and to the values that anchor the free world, so that thousands of us here tonight say single-voiced, if you believe in democracy, believe in Israel.

Three years ago, I wrote legislation in the United States Senate to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the founding of the modern state of Israel. It passed unanimously. When the whole world unfairly condemned Israel for defending in the flotilla incident, I didn't stay silent. I spoke up. I spoke up real loudly. I worked with Democrats and Republicans alike to collect almost 90 senators' signatures on a letter defending Israel's right to defend herself. And we all know that if we were attacked in the same way off our shores, the United States would've done nothing different. I've been happy, post many bipartisan Senate meetings with Israeli prime ministers, several with Prime Minister Netanyahu, and I look forward to his address tomorrow in a rare joint meeting of Congress.

I've always supported robust American aid to the state of Israel, and I always will. In Congress' budget last year, in a year and internal national spending was slashed, we ensured Israel got the full funding it needs. Frankly, that was no easy task, but my Senators stood by Israel. In Congress' next budget, I again support giving Israel full funding for security assistance.

We will face an even tougher budget environment this year, but I'm committed to defending this critical aid; but aid alone is not enough. We support Israel because it is in our national and in our security interests. We support Israel because she is what Isaiah called "a light unto the nations."

So we also must sustain her glow with all of our political might. The history of the Jewish people is in the land of Israel. Its future will be there, too. I support a strong, democratic Jewish state of Israel living in peace and security with the Palestinian state. Like you, I hope sincerely for a true and lasting peace between Israelis and the Palestinian people. This conflict is older than many of us, but I refuse to believe that means it cannot be resolved by us in our lifetimes.

These solutions are not simple. The only way to achieve the delicate balance we seek between security and peace is through the hard work of negotiation. And I believe the parties that should lead these negotiations must be the parties at the center of this conflict and no one else.

The place where negotiating will happen must be at the negotiating table and nowhere else. These negotiations will not happen -- won't -- will not happen; their terms will not be set through speeches or in the streets or in the media. No one should set premature parameters about borders, about building or about anything else.

I support strongly the resolutions Senators Cardin and Collins have introduced a negotiated settlement of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict should come through direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. If we're going to have faith that peace talks will be fruitful, we must know that those having the conversation are doing so in good faith, and if we wish for these talks to be productive, to produce a fair ending, we must demand a fair beginning.

What this means is that the Palestinians cannot bring to the negotiating table a terrorist organization that rejects Israel's right to exist. Nowhere else in the world, any place in the world, at no other time, is one party expected to compromise with a partner who denies its very existence.

A peace process can happen only when both sides seek peace, and two partners cannot build a bridge when one party refuses even to admit there is something on the other side of the span. My friend Shimon Peres is the most visionary leader I have ever known.

As he has said, "A government that includes Hamas is a threat not only to Israel. It is a threat to the creation of a Palestinian state, a threat to the legitimacy of a new state and a threat to the stability in the region." And we must never forget that these are the hostage-taking terrorists who have kept Sgt. Shalit from his family and fellow soldiers for almost five years. A fair beginning to good faith talks also means the Palestinians cannot simply stop by the negotiating table on their way to the United Nations, where they seek recognition that is at once purely symbolic and dangerously counterproductive. And a fair beginning to good faith talks means that Israel cannot be asked to agree to confines that would compromise its own security.

Palestinians' cooperation in the following fundamental principle will also determine America's willingness to continue our current aid program. I'll say this as clearly as I can: The United States of America will not give money to terrorists bent on the destruction of Israel. But the Palestinian government insists, including Hamas, the United States will continue to insist that Hamas recognize Israel's right to exist, that it renounce violence and that it honor the commitments made by prior Palestinian Authority governments. I was there when the first of those governments was conceived.

Some of you were there, too, and many of you remember clearly the sunny September day on the south lawn of the White House. We watched two sworn enemies sign the same piece of paper, and as they clasped hands, peace seemed within our grasp, too. Prime Minister Rabin spoke passionately that day about the promise of a new age. As a soldier and a father, he spoke of parents who were tired of war and dreamed of children who would not know war, but a child born on that day in 1993 will turn 18 years old at the end of this summer. Boys born in Haifa and girls born in Herzliya as Rabin and Arafat shook hands in this city are now counting down the days until they start their service to the IDF. And that child, a child who Rabin hoped would not know war, will still find himself or herself face-to-face with the same challenges with which his parents have grown very weary.

We must remember the lessons of Oslo. We must weigh both the potential and the peril of negotiating for Israel's future, and we must do better. The Torah teaches us to honor our father and our mother, but I believe we must also honor our children by creating for them the chance to know peace. And though that mission may be more daunting, and success seem more improbable in even the most intrepid midnight raid, but we've seen that faith and fearlessness have won us before. The next generation will face another menace, as well, one on which we cannot afford to lose focus amid frustration and fatigue, the stammering peace process.

The threat from Iran has not subsided. It cannot be underestimated or overstated. It is a common threat, a common enemy to both Israel and America. The president of Iran has made anti-Semitism his policy. He preaches vile propaganda and has articulated his regime's goal of erasing Israel from the map. While Iran torments its neighbors, it also brutalizes its own people. The world watched in horror as the regime murdered its own citizens in their own streets while they had done nothing but ask for the same basic freedoms all people desire. Sadly, these abuses continue today, unjust executions, abductions by security forces, arbitrary arrests and detention and, yes, torture.

As long as the terrorist state of Iran supports terrorist organizations in the Middle East, including Hamas and Hezbollah, as long as it hides behind these terrorists and uses them as proxies against Israel, as long as Iran continues to defy the international community by enriching uranium and brazenly defying United Nations security resolutions, America will stand against Iran for our sake and for Israel's sake.

Iran's terrorist sympathies are only the beginning of the problem. We know Iran is pursuing nuclear weapon capabilities and the means to launch those weapons into Israel. These same weapons could also reach our allies in Europe. A nuclear arms race in the Middle East could destabilize the entire region, making existing conflicts volatile and more dangerous. The regime threatens the national security of Israel and the United States. We will not sit back and watch it develop nuclear weapons capability.

This is why I worked so hard to pass last year's Iran sanctions bill, a bill that tells the Iranian regime, if you pursue nuclear weapons, you put your economy at risk. I thank each of you here tonight, because it was your hard work that got this bill to the president's desk.

Many of you personally came to Capitol Hill and made clear the urgent case for passing these sanctions, not just any sanctions. The AIPAC team was always there to make sure we passed the strongest legislation possible. You should be proud of what you accomplished. This program is comprehensive, and it's tough. Our goal was to target Iran where it hurts the regime the most.

So we imposed stringent new sanctions on its refined petroleum industry and on the international banking institutions that do business with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard. We've already seen these sanctions work. Major international firms began pulling out of Iran because they didn't want to put their business at risk. Iran's economy has suffered as a result. Of course, Iran continues to get around these sanctions. We knew that would happen. So we have to keep our foot on the gas. We have to make sure that the administration fully implements force of sanctions and keeps the pressure on our allies to do their part.

The Senate will also be working under a new round of legislation which will help tighten the sanctions we already passed. None of us wants to go to war with Iran. We all hope economic pain on the other side will prevent human suffering on our side, but we will not wait forever, and we will not take any option off the table.

President Kennedy, speaking of the great nuclear challenge of his time reminded us that our problems are man-made and they can be solved by man. He said, "Man's reason and spirit have often the seemingly unsolvable," and we believe they can do it again. Israel and America have done the impossible before. We can do it again. We must do it again.

Let me close how I began, with the story of a daring Israeli rescue mission, one that, to me, defines the Israel too few see and know. It's evening here, but in the middle of the night in Israel, where it's already the 24th of May, it's now 20 years almost to the hour that Operation Solomon began. Twenty years ago this month, civil war swept through Ethiopia. Over the previous year and a half, thousands of Ethiopian Jews had been brought to safety in Israel, but thousands more remained.

In May 1991, Ethiopia's dictator fled, and violent rebels controlled the capital. Time was ticking for the remaining Jews. Entire villages of men, women and children, although isolated from Israel and the rest of the Diaspora maintained the traditions of the Torah for thousands of years. Again, Israel's government and its partners executed a covert but flawless airlift, flying 36 overloaded aircraft for 36 tense hours to rescue more than 14,000 Jews, nearly the entire Jewish population of Ethiopia.

The Beta Israel, as they were called, brought no clothes, no belongings. When they set foot on Israel's soil for the first time, their feet were, indeed, the first things to touch the ground. Many didn't even have shoes. Months after the rescue, my wife and I had the privilege of meeting with these new Israelis in Israel. I'll never forget the smiles that they wore on their faces and the gratitude they had in their hearts for the state of Israel. They were brought to an unfamiliar country and thrown into a vastly different culture, but they had come home, and they couldn't have been

happier. Fifteen years after Entebbe and thousands of years after the exodus from Egypt, Israel demonstrated once again the lengths it will travel and the risks it will take for the safety of the Jewish people.

Israel demonstrated the unmatched precision and professionalism with which it operates. Twenty years ago tonight, in the deepest darkness, Israel's light unto the nations shone as brightly as ever. This is the Israel AIPAC and Congress has to share with the world. This is the Israel that does not define itself by war and worry, but by hope.

This is the Israel that has decided and dedicated itself to humanitarian aid and international development since Ben-Gurion called on his young country to share, as he said, "What little we have." This is the Israel that worked for years with the USAID to help unemployed Egyptians plant new farms in the desert. This is the Israel that flew into Haiti hours after the earthquake and set up the first fully equipped field hospital.

It is the Israel that didn't wait a minute between hearing about the disaster in Japan and going there to help. This is the Israel that continues to work with Ethiopia to eradicate HIV from orphanages and establish state of the art agricultural nurseries.

This is the Israel that built the armor that keeps American soldiers safe. This is the Israel that gave a grant to a Jerusalem start-up so it could invent the bandage that would save Congresswoman Gabby Giffords' life.

You see, this is the Israel we love. This is the Israel we have supported since its earliest minutes. Before the ink had even dried on the declaration of Israel's independence, with the name of the new state literally penciled in, America was the first nation to recognize Israel's right to self-determination and self defense. We were there from the beginning, and we will be there with her for all time.

America's commitment to Israel is incorruptible. It is non-negotiable, and we will never, never leave her side. Thank you very much.