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Remarks By John McCain at AIPAC

June 2, 2008

ARLINGTON, VA -- U.S. Senator John McCain delivered the following remarks as prepared for delivery at the AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington, D.C., today at 9:45 a.m. EDT:

Thank you all very much. I appreciate the kind introduction, and the invitation to address you. I see we have some students here, including a few from Arizona, and I welcome you to Washington. It's a pleasure, as always, to be in the company of the men and women of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. And I know that all of us are proud to be in the company of the distinguished senator from the State of Connecticut, my friend Joe Lieberman.

All of you involved in the work of AIPAC have taken up a great and vital cause – and a cause set firmly in the American heart. When President Truman recognized the new State of Israel sixty years ago, he acted on the highest ideals and best instincts of our country. He was a man with courage and a sense of history, and he surely knew what great challenges the Jewish state would face in its early years. To his lasting credit, he resolved that the people of Israel would not face them alone, because they would always have a friend and ally in the United States of America.

The cause of Israel, and of our common security, has always depended on men and women of courage, and I've been lucky enough to know quite a few of them. I think often of one in particular, the late Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson. I got to know Senator Jackson when I was the Navy liaison to the Senate. In 1979, I traveled with him to Israel, where I knew he was considered a hero. But I had no idea just how admired he was until we landed in Tel Aviv, to find a crowd of seven or eight hundred Israelis calling out his name, waving signs that read "God Bless you, Scoop" and "Senator Jackson, thank you." Scoop Jackson had the special respect of the Jewish people, the kind of respect accorded to brave and faithful friends. He was and remains the model of what an American statesman should be.

The people of Israel reserve a special respect for courage, because so much courage has been required of them. In the record of history, sheer survival in the face of Israel's many trials would have been impressive enough. But Israel has achieved much more than that these past sixty years. Israel has endured, and thrived, and her people have built a nation that is an inspiration to free nations everywhere.

Yet no matter how successful the nation of Israel, or how far removed from the Holocaust, there are experiences that will never pass from memory. Not long ago I was in Jerusalem with Senator Lieberman and our colleague Lindsey Graham, and we went to the Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem. And for all the boundless examples of cruelty and inhumanity to be found there, for all the pain and grief remembered there, somehow I was especially moved by the story of the camp survivors who died from the very nourishment given to them by their liberators. They had starved and suffered so much that their bodies were too weak even for food. They endured it all, only to die at the moment of their deliverance.

These are the kind of experiences that the Jewish people carry in memory – and they are far from the worst experiences of the Holocaust. These are the kind of griefs and afflictions from which the State of Israel offered escape. And today, when we join in saying "never again," that is not a wish, a request, or a plea to the enemies of Israel. It is a promise that the United States and Israel will honor, against any enemy who cares to test us.

The threats to Israel's security are large and growing, and America's commitment must grow as well. I strongly support the increase in military aid to Israel, scheduled to begin in October. I am committed to making certain Israel maintains its qualitative military edge. Israel's enemies are too numerous, its margin of error too small, and our shared interests and values too great for us to follow any other policy.

Foremost in all our minds is the threat posed by the regime in Tehran. The Iranian president has called for Israel to be "wiped off the map" and suggested that Israel's Jewish population should return to Europe. He calls Israel a "stinking corpse" that is "on its way to annihilation." But the Iranian leadership does far more than issue vile insults. It acts in ways directly detrimental to the security of Israel and the United States.

A sponsor of both Hamas and Hezbollah, the leadership of Iran has repeatedly used violence to undermine Israel and the Middle East peace process. It has trained, financed, and equipped extremists in Iraq who have killed American soldiers fighting to bring freedom to that country. It remains the world's chief sponsor of terrorism and threatens to destabilize the entire Middle East, from Basra to Beirut.

Tehran's continued pursuit of nuclear weapons poses an unacceptable risk, a danger we cannot allow. Emboldened by nuclear weapons, Iran would feel free to sponsor terrorist attacks against any perceived enemy. Its flouting of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty would render that agreement obsolete and could induce Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and others to join a nuclear arms race. The world would have to live, indefinitely, with the possibility that Tehran might pass nuclear materials or weapons to one of its allied terrorist networks. Armed as well with its ballistic missile arsenal, an Iranian

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nuclear bomb would pose an existential threat to the people of Israel.

European negotiators have proposed a peaceful endgame for Tehran, should it abandon its nuclear ambitions and comply with UN Security Council resolutions. The plan offers far-reaching economic incentives, external support for a civilian nuclear energy program, and integration into the international community. But Tehran has said no.

The Iranians have spent years working toward a nuclear program. And the idea that they now seek nuclear weapons because we refuse to engage in presidential-level talks is a serious misreading of history. In reality, a series of administrations have tried to talk to Iran, and none tried harder than the Clinton administration. In 1998, the secretary of state made a public overture to the Iranians, laid out a roadmap to normal relations, and for two years tried to engage. The Clinton administration even lifted some sanctions, and Secretary Albright apologized for American actions going back to the 1950s. But even under President Khatami – a man by all accounts less radical than the current president – Iran rejected these overtures.

Even so, we hear talk of a meeting with the Iranian leadership offered up as if it were some sudden inspiration, a bold new idea that somehow nobody has ever thought of before. Yet it's hard to see what such a summit with President Ahmadinejad would actually gain, except an earful of anti-Semitic rants, and a worldwide audience for a man who denies one Holocaust and talks before frenzied crowds about starting another. Such a spectacle would harm Iranian moderates and dissidents, as the radicals and hardliners strengthen their position and suddenly acquire the appearance of respectability.

Rather than sitting down unconditionally with the Iranian president or supreme leader in the hope that we can talk sense into them, we must create the real-world pressures that will peacefully but decisively change the path they are on. Essential to this strategy is the UN Security Council, which should impose progressively tougher political and economic sanctions. Should the Security Council continue to delay in this responsibility, the United States must lead like-minded countries in imposing multilateral sanctions outside the UN framework. I am proud to have been a leader on these issues for years, having coauthored the 1992 Iran-Iraq Arms Non-Proliferation Act. Over a year ago I proposed applying sanctions to restrict Iran's ability to import refined petroleum products, on which it is highly dependent, and the time has come for an international campaign to do just that. A severe limit on Iranian imports of gasoline would create immediate pressure on Khamenei and Ahmadinejad to change course, and to cease in the pursuit of nuclear weapons.

At the same time, we need the support of those in the region who are most concerned about Iran, and of our European partners as well. They can help by imposing targeted sanctions that will impose a heavy cost on the regime's leaders, including the denial of visas and freezing of assets.

As a further measure to contain and deter Iran, the United States should impose financial sanctions on the Central Bank of Iran, which aids in Iran's terrorism and weapons proliferation. We must apply the full force of law to prevent business dealings with Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. I was pleased to join Senators Lieberman and Kyl in backing an amendment calling for the designation of the Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organization responsible for killing American troops in Iraq. Over three quarters of the Senate supported this obvious step, but not Senator Obama. He opposed this resolution because its support for countering Iranian influence in Iraq was, he said, a "wrong message not only to the world, but also to the region." But here, too, he is mistaken. Holding Iran's influence in check, and holding a terrorist organization accountable, sends exactly the right message – to Iran, to the region and to the world.

We should privatize the sanctions against Iran by launching a worldwide divestment campaign. As more people, businesses, pension funds, and financial institutions across the world divest from companies doing business with Iran, the radical elite who run that country will become even more unpopular than they are already. Years ago, the moral clarity and conviction of civilized nations came together in a divestment campaign against South Africa, helping to rid that nation of the evil of apartheid. In our day, we must use that same power and moral conviction against the regime in Iran, and help to safeguard the people of Israel and the peace of the world.

In all of this, we will not only be defending our own safety and welfare, but also the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people. They are a great and civilized people, with little sympathy for the terrorists their leaders finance, and no wish to threaten other nations with nuclear weapons. Iran's rulers would be very different if the people themselves had a choice in the matter, and American policy should always reflect their hopes for a freer and more just society. The same holds true for the Palestinian people, most of whom ask only for a better life in a less violent world.

They are badly served by the terrorist-led group in charge of Gaza. This is a group that still refuses to recognize Israel's right to exist, refuses to denounce violence, and refuses to acknowledge prior peace commitments. They deliberately target Israeli civilians, in an attempt to terrorize the Jewish population. They spread violence and hatred, and with every new bombing they set back the cause of their own people.

During my last visit to Israel in March, I saw for myself the work of Hamas in the town of Sderot, just across the border from Gaza. I saw the houses that have been hit by Hamas rockets. In the face of injuries, death, and destruction thousands of Israelis have fled the town. Many others have stayed, to carry on as best they can. I visited the home of a man named Pinhas Amar, who lives with his disabled wife, Aliza, and their children. One day, last year, the sirens sounded again to alert the town to incoming rocket fire. The rest of the family found cover. Aliza, on the other side of the house, was knocked out of her wheelchair and struck by shrapnel.

This occurred on December 13. And from that day until the day of my visit just some three months later, more than a thousand rockets had struck Sderot. Today, siren warnings are commonplace, the elementary schools are surrounded by concrete shelters and children walking the streets in costume for Purim celebrations did so in fear. No nation in the world would allow its population to be attacked so incessantly, to be killed and intimidated so mercilessly, without responding. And the nation of Israel is no exception.

Prime Minister Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas are engaged in talks that all of us hope will yield progress toward peace. Yet while we encourage this process, we must also ensure that Israel's people can live in safety until there is a Palestinian leadership willing and able to deliver peace. A peace process that places faith in terrorists can never end in peace. And we do no favors to the Palestinian people by conferring approval upon the terrorist syndicate that

has seized power in Gaza.

Likewise, Israel's chance for enduring peace with Lebanon depends on Lebanese government that has a monopoly on authority within its country's borders. That means no independent militias, no Hezbollah fighters, no weapons and equipment flowing to Hezbollah.

Hezbollah fighters recently took up arms against their fellow Lebanese, starting the worst internal fighting since the civil war ended in 1990. In the process, they extracted an agreement for a new political arrangement in which Hezbollah and its allies can veto any cabinet decision. As the leader of Hezbollah often reminds us, this group's mission is the defeat of Israel. The international community needs to more fully empower our allies in Lebanon – not only with military aid but also with the resources to undermine Hezbollah's appeal: better schools, hospitals, roads and power generation, and the like. We simply cannot afford to cede Lebanon's future to Syria and Iran.

And we have an additional task. In the summer of 2006, Hamas and Hezbollah kidnapped three young Israelis – Gilad Shalit, Eldad Regev, and Ehud Goldwasser – and have held them ever since. I met with the families of two of these men in December 2006, and heard firsthand about their ordeal. I committed then to bring attention to their situation, to insist that the Geneva Conventions are observed, and to call for the swift release of these men. These men are being unlawfully held, and they must be set free and returned home to Israel.

Another matter of great importance to the security of both America and Israel is Iraq. You would never know from listening to those who are still caught up in angry arguments over yesterday's options, but our troops in Iraq have made hard-won progress under General Petraeus' new strategy. And Iraqi political leaders have moved ahead – slowly and insufficiently, but forward nonetheless. Sectarian violence declined dramatically, Sunnis in Anbar province and throughout Iraq are cooperating in the fight against al Qaeda, and Shia extremist militias no longer control Basra – the Maliki government and its forces are in charge. Al Qaeda terrorists are on the run, and our troops are going to make sure they never come back.

It's worth recalling that America's progress in Iraq is the direct result of the new strategy that Senator Obama opposed. It was the strategy he predicted would fail, when he voted cut off funds for our forces in Iraq. He now says he intends to withdraw combat troops from Iraq – one to two brigades per month until they are all removed. He will do so regardless of the conditions in Iraq, regardless of the consequences for our national security, regardless of Israel's security, and in disregard of the best advice of our commanders on the ground.

This course would surely result in a catastrophe. If our troops are ordered to make a forced retreat, we risk all-out civil war, genocide, and a failed state in the heart of the Middle East. Al Qaeda terrorists would rejoice in the defeat of the United States. Allowing a potential terrorist sanctuary would profoundly affect the security of the United States, Israel, and our other friends, and would invite further intervention from Iraq's neighbors, including an emboldened Iran. We must not let this happen. We must not leave the region to suffer chaos, terrorist violence and a wider war.

My friends, as the people of Israel know better than most, the safety of free people can never be taken for granted. And in a world full of dangers, Israel and the United States must always stand together.

The State of Israel stands as a singular achievement in many ways, and not the least is its achievement as the great democracy of the Middle East. If there are ties between America and Israel that critics of our alliance have never understood, perhaps that is because they do not fully understand the love of liberty and the pursuit of justice. But they should know those ties cannot be broken. We were brought together by shared ideals and by shared adversity. We have been comrades in struggle, and trusted partners in the quest for peace. We are the most natural of allies. And, like Israel itself, that alliance is forever.

Thank you.

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