Remarks by the President at AIPAC Policy Conference

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THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. Well, good morning, everyone.

Rosy, thank you for your kind words. I have never seen Rosy on the basketball court. I’ll bet it would be a treat. (Laughter.) Rosy, you’ve been a dear friend of mine for a long time and a tireless advocate for the unbreakable bonds between Israel and the United States. And as you complete your term as President, I salute your leadership and your commitment. (Applause.)

I want to thank the board of directors. As always, I’m glad to see my long-time friends in the Chicago delegation. (Applause.) I also want to thank the members of Congress who are with us here today, and who will be speaking to you over the next few days. You’ve worked hard to maintain the partnership between the United States and Israel. And I especially want to thank my close friend, and leader of the Democratic National Committee, Debbie Wasserman Schultz. (Applause.)

I’m glad that my outstanding young Ambassador to Israel, Dan Shapiro, is in the house. (Applause.) I understand that Dan is perfecting his Hebrew on his new assignment, and I appreciate his constant outreach to the Israeli people. And I’m also pleased that we’re joined by so many Israeli officials, including Ambassador Michael Oren. (Applause.) And tomorrow, I’m very much looking forward to welcoming Prime Minister Netanyahu and his delegation back to the White House. (Applause.)

Every time I come to AIPAC, I’m especially impressed to see so many young people here. (Applause.) You don’t get the front seats — I understand. (Laughter.) You have to earn that. But students from all over the country who are making their voices heard and engaging deeply in our democratic debate. You carry with you an extraordinary legacy of more than six decades of friendship between the United States and Israel. And you have the opportunity — and the responsibility — to make your own mark on the world. And for inspiration, you can look to the man who preceded me on this stage, who’s being honored at this conference — my friend, President Shimon Peres. (Applause.)

Shimon was born a world away from here, in a shtetl what was then Poland, a few years after the end of the first world war. But his heart was always in Israel, the historic homeland of the Jewish people. (Applause.) And when he was just a boy he made his journey across land and sea — toward home.

In his life, he has fought for Israel’s independence, and he has fought for peace and security. As a member of the Haganah and a member of the Knesset, as a Minister of Defense and Foreign Affairs, as a Prime Minister and as President — Shimon helped build the nation that thrives today: the Jewish state of Israel. (Applause.) But beyond these extraordinary achievements, he has also been a powerful moral voice that reminds us that right makes might — not the other way around. (Applause.)

Shimon once described the story of the Jewish people by saying it proved that, “slings, arrows and gas chambers can annihiliate man, but cannot destroy human values, dignity, and freedom.” And he has lived those values. (Applause.) He has taught us to ask more of ourselves, and to empathize more with our fellow human beings. I am grateful for his life’s work and his moral example. And I’m proud to announce that later this spring, I will invite Shimon Peres to the White House to present him with America’s highest civilian honor — the Presidential Medal of
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place as a Jewish and democratic state must be protected. (Applause.)

Of course, peace is hard to achieve. There’s a reason why it’s remained elusive for six decades. The upheaval and uncertainty in Israel’s neighborhood makes it that much harder -– from the horn of Africa to Syria, to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict itself. That’s why I’ve made it clear that any Palestinian partner must recognize Israel’s right to exist, and reject violence, and adhere to existing agreements. (Applause.) And that is why my administration has consistently rejected any efforts to short-cut negotiations or impose an agreement on the parties. (Applause.)

As Rosy noted, last year, I stood before you and pledged that, “the United States will stand up against efforts to single Israel out at the United Nations.” As you know, that pledge has been kept. (Applause.) Last September, I stood before the United Nations General Assembly and reaffirmed that any lasting peace must acknowledge the fundamental legitimacy of Israel and its security concerns. I said that America’s commitment to Israel’s security is unshakeable, our friendship with Israel is enduring, and that Israel must be recognized. No American President has made such a clear statement about our support for Israel at the United Nations at such a difficult time. People usually give those speeches before audiences like this one -- not before the General Assembly. (Applause.)

And I must say, there was not a lot of applause. (Laughter.) But it was the right thing to do. (Applause.) And as a result, today there is no doubt -- anywhere in the world -- that the United States will insist upon Israel’s security and legitimacy. (Applause.) That will be true as we continue our efforts to pursue -- in the pursuit of peace. And that will be true when it comes to the issue that is such a focus for all of us today: Iran’s nuclear program -- a threat that has the potential to bring together the worst rhetoric about Israel’s destruction with the world’s most dangerous weapons.

Let’s begin with a basic truth that you all understand: No Israeli government can tolerate a nuclear weapon in the hands of a regime that denies the Holocaust, threatens to wipe Israel off the map, and sponsors terrorist groups committed to Israel’s destruction. (Applause.) And so I understand the profound historical obligation that weighs on the shoulders of Sibi Netanyahu and Ehud Barak, and all of Israel’s leaders.

A nuclear-armed Iran is completely counter to Israel’s security interests. But it is also counter to the national security interests of the United States. (Applause.)

Indeed, the entire world has an interest in preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. A nuclear-armed Iran would thoroughly undermine the non-proliferation regime that we’ve done so much to build. There are risks that an Iranian nuclear weapon could fall into the hands of a terrorist organization. It is almost certain that others in the region would feel compelled to get their own nuclear weapon, triggering an arms race in one of the world’s most volatile regions. It would embolden a regime that has brutalized its own people, and it would embolden Iran’s proxies, who have carried out terrorist attacks from the Levant to Southwest Asia.

And that is why, four years ago, I made a commitment to the American people, and said that we would use all elements of American power to pressure Iran and prevent it from acquiring a nuclear weapon. And that is what we have done. (Applause.)

When I took office, the efforts to apply pressure on Iran were in tatters. Iran had gone from zero centrifuges spinning to thousands, without facing broad pushback from the world. In the region, Iran was ascendant -- increasingly popular, and extending its reach. In other words, the Iranian leadership was united and on the move, and the international community was divided about how to go forward.

And so from my very first months in office, we put forward a very clear choice to the Iranian regime: a path that would allow them to reclaim the community of nations if they meet their international obligations, or a path that leads to an escalating series of consequences if they don’t. In fact, our policy of engagement -- quickly rebuffed by the Iranian regime -- allowed us to rally the international community as never before, to expose Iran’s intransigence, and to apply pressure that goes far beyond anything that the United States could do on our own.

Because of our efforts, Iran is under greater pressure than ever before. Some of you will recall, people predicted that Russia and China wouldn’t join us to move toward pressure. They did. And in 2010 the U.N. Security Council overwhelmingly supported a comprehensive sanctions effort. Few thought that sanctions could have an immediate bite on the Iranian regime. They have, slowing the Iranian nuclear program and virtually grinding the Iranian economy to a halt in 2011. Many questioned whether we could hold our coalition together as we moved against Iran’s Central Bank and oil exports. But our friends in Europe and Asia and elsewhere are joining us. And in 2012, the Iranian government faces the prospect of even more crippling sanctions.
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