Israel: Central to the Middle East’s Future

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By Secretary of State Mike Pompeo

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SECRETARY POMPEO: Wow, good evening, everyone. (Cheers.) What a crowd. What a crowd. It’s great to be here. It is wonderful to be with you all tonight. I want to say a few thank yous. My thanks to AIPAC board chairman Mort Fridman, my friend Howard Kohr and your new president Betsy Berns Korn, and all the incredible AIPAC members and amazing volunteers for putting this amazing gathering together. Thank you. God bless you all. (Applause.)

I’ve been here a few times. When I was a member of Congress, I got to know the AIPAC team. They were relentless. I came to love them. (Laughter.) But it is wonderful, and it never gets old to be here with so many great friends of the relationship between America and Israel. (Applause.)

You should know that there is no president and no administration that loves Israel more than President Trump and our team. (Applause and cheers.)

So I was going to walk through the things we’ve done in three years, but I’m just going to do since I was here last time, because we got to – we all got to get some place tonight. (Laughter.) So let’s take a look at what we’ve done just since the last time I stood right here.

We declared the common-sense truth that the Israeli West Bank settlements aren’t per se inconsistent with international law. (Applause.)

We released a groundbreaking Vision for Peace. (Applause.)

And President Trump took out one of the world’s worst anti-Semites, the terrorist Qasem Soleimani. (Cheers and applause.)

So the previous administration had a phrase they used to say. They used to say that Usama bin Ladin is dead and General Motors is alive. So that was good.

I think we can do one better: Qasem Soleimani is dead; and Israel and the United States are alive. (Cheers and applause.)

What’s really important about that is that nations of the Middle East and the world are recognizing just how enduring Israel is. They’re coming to recognize that the more the Middle East embraces Israel, the brighter their future will be. And that’s what I want to focus on this evening.

Under President Trump, Israel is not a pariah, but a partner, and rightly so. (Applause.)

Our special nations – our special nations share so much: a pioneering spirit; basic rights and freedoms, including religious freedom and pluralism; rough-and-tumble politics. Indeed, Israel loves democracy so much, today they are holding their third election. They cannot get enough of them. (Laughter.)

And just think of all the benefits that Israel brings to the region in which it lives.

It’s an example of pluralism and free speech. (Applause.)

Israel brings a robust, free-market, innovative economy where entrepreneurship is rewarded. (Applause.)

And it is a place, it is a unique place in that region, a place where all can worship freely without fear or favor. (Applause.)

These good things have ripple effects. You all know this. A strong democracy sets that example for pluralism. A productive Israeli economy creates jobs. And an Israeli society respectful of all faiths shows there is nothing to fear from religious minorities.

Now, not every nation or institution is as supportive of a strong, free, democratic, and prosperous Israel as we are. But look closely, look closely around the world, and you will see that the nations of the world are increasingly embracing Israel – the nation-state of the Jewish people – as central to a bright future for the Middle East. (Applause.)

In December, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced plans for his government to pass an anti-BDS law. (Applause.)

That same month, French parliamentarians voted to declare anti-Zionism as anti-Semitism, as I spoke about last year. (Applause.)

Greece and Cyprus have pursued a new energy partnership with Israel, as have Egypt and Jordan. (Applause.)

Guatemala, Honduras, Nauru have recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and Brazil says that it intends to do so. Come join. (Applause.)

Look, too, at the budding trend in the Middle East: Israel’s Gulf nations are warming to her. In 2018, Oman received Prime Minister Netanyahu for a visit. (Applause.)

That very same year, the UAE played the Israeli national anthem, “The Hope,” at a judo tournament hosted in Abu Dhabi, not once, but twice. (Applause.)

Last year, our Bahraini friends allowed Israeli journalists to visit for the first time since 1994. (Applause.)

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said, quote, “I believe the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have their own land.” (Applause.)

And I remember being in that room when ambassadors from Oman, Bahrain, and the UAE attended the White House ceremony unveiling the Vision for Peace, where President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu both offered remarks. (Applause.)

Now, these are just small examples, just a few glimpses of harmony. And there is still much more progress to be made.

But I think these anecdotes suggest a growing attitude, a real shift, a shift among some of Israel’s neighbors. And the more the Middle East embraces Israel, the brighter its future will be. That’s true for the entire region. (Applause.)

As I said earlier, there are some around the world who still refuse to see Israel’s shining example, or respect Israel’s rights as a nation.

The number one state sponsor of anti-Semitism in the world – the Islamic Republic of Iran – is undoubtedly the worst.

The regime continues to stoke hatred of Jews to serve their own corrupt ends, through classroom textbooks, state media propaganda, and the poisoned declarations of their unelected leaders.

How sad, given that Iranians gave sanctuary to Jews during the Holocaust, and helped Jewish families escape persecution in Iraq. It doesn’t have to be this way.

Let me be clear: The world knows – the world knows that the noble Iranian people do not hate Israel, or Jews, or any other religious group. (Applause.) It’s the bigoted, intolerant regime that does. (Applause.) And it is that regime – it is that regime and its views – as the reason that President Trump said so clearly that Iran will never obtain a nuclear weapon while we’re on watch. (Applause.)

So who else refuses to respect Israel? Sadly, there are members of Congress who do, too.

In November, I received a letter from 106 members of Congress. They criticized moving the embassy to Jerusalem, closing the Palestinian office in D.C., halting foreign assistance to the West Bank and Gaza, and the rethinking that we did at the State Department about the settlements issue. Their claim – their claim in this letter – was that this “discredited the United States as an honest broker between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.” They claimed this “severely damaged prospects for peace.” They claimed that this “endangered the security of America, Israel, and the Palestinian people.”

You know that discredits the United States. What damages peace, what endangers security, it’s not recognizing the truth. The truth must be spoken, and it’s what President Trump and our administration has done. (Applause and cheers.)

The harm – look, the harm to Israel, the harm to the region, the harm to the relationship between the United States and Israel comes from denying that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, by denying that the closing of the Palestinian[1] in Washington was 100 percent necessary following President Abbas’ 2017 remarks at the UN.

What damages and discredits the United States and our relationship with Israel is denying that Palestinian terrorism has been the real obstacle to peace. (Applause.) And it discredits this relationship when you deny that the settlement issue is a political dispute and not a political puzzle, as – and I’ll have more to say about that in just a moment.

And finally, the UN. The UN’s so-called Human Rights Council, and the High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet.

For those of you who are watching, the council recently released a database of companies doing business in East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank. That release from the United Nations only serves to facilitate the BDS movement and delegitimize Israel.

How sad. I remember reading it after its release. This is an organization that was set up to ensure that no people ever again faced horrors like the Jews faced during the Holocaust, and it is now anti-Semitic. (Applause.)

This administration was right when President Trump asked us to leave an international institution that grossly betrays its most fundamental mandate. (Applause.)

My friends, President Trump and his team aren’t standing for this nonsense.

We know that the more the Middle East embraces Israel, the brighter their future will be.

It’s why we’ve taken action against those who would harm or weaken Israel. (Applause.)

We’ve enacted the strongest pressure campaign in history to deprive the Islamic Republic of Iran diplomatic sanctuary, or money for terror. (Applause.)

We rallied nations in our own hemisphere, here in the Western Hemisphere, and in Europe to declare Hizballah a terrorist organization in its entirety. (Applause.)

And we’ve had other nations now join us in banning Mahan Air that has flown around dangerous military actors – the ayatollahs’ airline of choice – so that it can’t move around weapons and fighters in the region that put Israelis at risk. (Applause.)

On the settlements issue, on the settlements we couldn’t be more clear. We’ve concluded that the Obama administration’s wrong approach did not help the peace process or prospects for peace. (Applause.)

We worked. We got it right.

We disavowed the Hansell memo of the 1970s, which declared that civilian settlements beyond the Green Line were illegal, just as President Ronald Reagan had rejected that memo a few years after it was written. (Applause.)

And let me remind you that no less than Senator Schumer said right here at AIPAC in 2018 that “it’s sure not the settlements that are the blockage to peace.” (Applause.)

And further on the settlements issue – I know some American companies are wondering – some of you here today are wondering how to move forward in the wake of the UN Human Rights Council’s release of the database that I just spoke about. It may not seem like much to some of you, but this is a real threat.

And I am proud to tell you that, this afternoon, the State Department released official guidance on this subject.

Here’s what we said:

We said that we share your frustration.

We will continue to work with, trade, and invest in Israel.

Neither the Human Rights Council nor the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has the power to tell you what you can and can’t do business in the West Bank.

Don’t be intimidated. If you are being subjected to intimidation or harassment because of this database, let America know.

And the United States will respond to take actions against members of our business community that are being threatened by this release that was so sorely mistaken. (Applause and cheers.)

It’s consistent with all that we have done. We will stand for a strong, free, democratic, and prosperous Middle East and a prosperous Israel at the heart of that Middle East.

The more the Middle East embraces Israel, the brighter the future will be. It’s really quite simple.

We stand with Israel.

We stand for peace in the Holy Land.

We stand with the great Israeli people.

And we stand for the unbreakable bond between our two great nations, rooted in our shared traditions of freedom and equality.

That tradition goes back to a beautiful biblical teaching that all humans are created “b’tzelem Elohim,” “in the image of God.” (Applause.)

That matters, for it drives all that we do together. And I know that’s what everyone here in attendance tonight believe. I know that it’s what the members of AIPAC believe. It’s what we all believe in.

May God bless this great institution of AIPAC.

May God bless Israel.

And God bless these great United States of America.

Thank you all. (Applause.)