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Remarks At the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee Policy Conference

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Walter E. Washington Convention Center
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(10:50 a.m. EDT)

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you. I want to thank Howard, first of all, for that kind introduction. And thanks to all of you and your fellow members of the Board for inviting me here today. I'd also like to thank David Victor and Howard Kohr for their leadership of this fantastic organization. It is always my pleasure to be among friends here at AIPAC to have a chance to thank you, all of the members of the organization, for strengthening one of the most vital relationships that our nation has: our alliance with the state of Israel. (Applause.)

I was honored to address AIPAC in 2005. It was my first year as Secretary of State. And I am honored to join all of you in what is now my last year as Secretary. And I want to thank you for all recognizing that that wasn't intended as an applause line. (Laughter.)

It's indeed a joyful coincidence that we are also commemorating this year the 60th anniversary of Israel's founding. (Applause.) Today, America's commitment to Israel is unwavering, but 60 years ago, the issue was still open for debate. On a May afternoon in 1948, President Truman gathered his advisors in the Oval Office. The administration was divided; the mood was tense. At one point, Truman's Secretary of State told him that if the administration backed the creation of Israel, he would vote against Truman in the next election. Now, I've said a lot of candid things to President Bush. But never anything like that.

Two days later, David Ben-Gurion and his fellow founding fathers proclaimed Israel's independence. And 11 minutes later, the United States became the first nation in the world to recognize the democratic Jewish state of Israel. (Applause.)

As you know, President Bush and I were just in Jerusalem for Israel's official celebration of independence. (Applause.) This was a deeply moving experience for me personally. Over the past eight years, I have come better – to know better and to indeed love the Israeli people. And today, it makes me immensely proud to say that, after 60 years, Israel has no better friend in the world than the United States of America. (Applause.)

The U.S.-Israel alliance is indivisible and unbreakable – for at its heart are people like you. Because of citizens of conscience like all of you, our alliance with Israel will forever be rooted in a fellowship of families, of friends, and of faith ... deepened by a shared culture of tolerance and a pioneer spirit ... and elevated by interests reinforced by common ideals. This is the true foundation of the U.S.-Israel alliance. It is enduring. And we reject any attempt to reduce it to crude conspiracy theories. (Applause.)

Our kinship with Israel gives us Americans a visceral understanding and sympathy for how Israel's confidence is tested when it comes to security. I remember all-too-well the awful days of 2001 and 2002, when Israelis feared that every bus ride, every night out, was another Passover massacre waiting to happen. And I know the anguish and anger that all Israelis feel, and that we Americans feel, as the terror of random rockets still rains down on innocent people in towns like Sderot and Ashkelon.

The thought that our Israeli allies might live in fear and insecurity is simply unacceptable to our nation. (Applause.) It is unacceptable to President Bush. It is unacceptable to me. And that is why our Administration promised from our very first days that America's enduring commitment to Israel's security would be absolutely unshakeable on our watch. And that is a promise that we have kept. (Applause.)

When Israel was besieged by terror in the second intifada, it was the United States that insisted that Israel had a right to defend itself.

When people used to say, and we forget now that they did say it, "One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter," it was the United States that said: No. The intentional murder of innocent people is wrong everywhere at all times. (Applause.)

When people alleged, as some still do, that America's alliance with Israel was somehow not quite in our national interest, it was President Bush and it was I who said, in fact, the opposite is true: Our security and our values are enhanced in a world where there is a successful democratic ally called Israel. (Applause.)

When terrorists abducted three Israelis – Gilad Shalit, Ehud Goldwasser, and Eldad Regev – who are still illegally to this day held, America's heart broke for their families, and we continue to demand the safe and immediate return of these young men to their homes. (Applause.)

And when the President of Iran stated his desire to "wipe Israel off the map," it was the United States that arranged a 10-year, \$30 billion security package to help Israel defend its homeland against any threat. (Applause.)

Now, we hear Iran's rulers say that they do not seek a nuclear weapon, only peaceful nuclear energy. Well, then why have they rejected the past offers from the international community for incentives, even cooperation on light water reactors? Why has Iran rejected, thus far, Russia's offer of uranium enrichment in Russia? Why, as the IAEA's most

recent report shows, is Iran continuing to enrich uranium, in violation of UN Security Council resolutions? Why, as the IAEA also suggests, are parts of Iran's nuclear program under the control of the Iranian military? And why is Iran continuing to deny international experts full access to its nuclear facilities? Well, ladies and gentlemen, it's just hard to imagine that there are innocent answers to these questions. (Applause.)

I know that there is a serious debate right now, both in our country and in Israel, about how to address the threat posed by the Iranian regime. This debate, though, should not be about whether we talk to Iran. That is not the real issue. (Applause.) Diplomacy is not a synonym for talking. True diplomacy means structuring a set of incentives and disincentives to produce change in behavior. So let me tell you how I see our diplomacy.

On the one hand, we are showing the rulers of Iran that if they think the best way to advance their national interests is through lying, and cheating, and terror, they will only deepen their isolation and the cost to their nation. (Applause.) The Iranian Government is dangerous. Yet, Iran has vulnerabilities: its failing, inflationary economic policies; its discredited revolutionary ideology; the resentment that its violent behavior fosters among its neighbors; and the deprivation of its people at home. We can and we must exploit these vulnerabilities.

The world has passed three sets of sanctions against Iran in the Security Council. The United States has also taken additional steps of sanctioning Iran's Revolutionary Guards, its Qods Force, and three of its major banks for abusing the international financial system. We have sent carrier battle groups to the region to deter attacks against our allies and our interests. And we will continue to improve the capabilities of our friends, including through missile defense cooperation with Israel. (Applause.)

In Iraq, we are confronting and wrapping up Iranian agents who are attacking our troops, destabilizing the country, and killing innocent Iraqis. When Iranian-backed militias challenged Iraqi security forces in Basra, they lost. And they are in retreat in Sadr City. (Applause.) Indeed, by meddling so egregiously in Iraq's internal affairs, Iran's regime is increasingly on the wrong side of Iraqi nationalism. And it is hard to overstate how important this could be as a check on the regional ambitions of this violent and extremist state.

America will continue to rally the world to hold Iran accountable. But the world needs to rise to this challenge. Our partners, in Europe and beyond, need to exploit Iran's vulnerabilities more vigorously and impose greater costs on the regime – economically, financially, politically, and diplomatically. (Applause.) A regime that denies the Holocaust, threatens – murders – its neighbors' citizens, and seeks to destroy a member of the United Nations should not be allowed to cross the nuclear threshold. As President Bush told the Knesset: "For the sake of peace, the world must not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon." (Applause.)

At the same time, President Bush and I have been clear that a path is open for Iran to improve its relations with the international community and with the United States. Indeed, I have said that if Iran suspends its enrichment and reprocessing activities, I will join my UN Security Council colleagues, I will meet with my Iranian counterpart – I'll do it anytime, anywhere, on any issue. It's hard to be much clearer than that.

And we would welcome such a change in Iran's behavior. Because America doesn't have permanent enemies. We would be willing to meet with them, but not while they continue to inch closer to a nuclear weapon under the cover of talk. (Applause.) So the real question is not: Why won't the Bush administration talk to Tehran? The real question is: Why won't Tehran talk to us? (Applause.)

This, ladies and gentlemen, is the real practice of diplomacy. It requires that we keep open a path for negotiation, but it also requires that we impose costs on the Iranian regime should they refuse to negotiate. (Applause.)

To defeat terrorism and extremism, we must, however, do more than just eliminate immediate threats. We must also support all leaders and citizens in the Middle East who advance their aspirations non-violently. Indeed, we must support them in an unprecedented effort to forge a new regional alignment – not based on sect or ethnicity, but on values. An alignment that, on the one hand, strengthens responsible leaders and citizens who reject terrorism, while on the other hand, isolating and marginalizing extremists.

The main idea is this: When stripped of its rhetoric of resistance, its false promises of a better life, its hollow pretensions of piety, and its empty claims to represent the interests of all people, the ideology of violent extremism is not something that a majority in the Middle East will actually support. For this reason, we must create conditions that expose the true motives of violent extremists and show them for what they really are: thugs and tyrants who seek only to expand their own power by any means necessary, including through the murder and repression of their fellow Muslims.

That is why freedom and democracy and pluralism are vital: These are the only ideas that can ultimately give responsible Muslims the political space to discredit violent extremism. That is ultimately how we win. And the only way we will lose is if we quit – if we lose the will to support and promote our own values. (Applause.)

This struggle is now unfolding across the Middle East, and in a few places, opportunities are arising to turn the tide against the terrorists. We see glimpses of decent, democratic states emerging – states that can meet the needs of their people and serve as bulwarks against extremism.

Iraq is one such state. Backed by our military and civilian surge, the Iraqi Government is increasingly meeting the duties of a normal state. It is taking on violent extremists in places like Basra, and Mosul, and Sadr City. The Iraqi Government is increasingly winning its people's trust by attempting to provide justice, and basic services, and opportunity. The process is still fragile and it still needs America's wholehearted support. But as the Iraqi state grows more capable, more and more Iraqis will choose lives of peace and rebel against the extremists in their midst – as they've done in the Anbar province, where Iraqis have rejected the tyranny of al-Qaida, and in Basra, where Iraqis are starting to turn against militias and criminals backed by Iran. (Applause.)

In Lebanon, the Doha agreement was a necessary and even positive step. It is true that the conditions were created by Hezbollah's violent actions, but there is an opening for Lebanese patriots to bolster their nation's independence, expand its sovereignty, and strengthen the democratic state. And Hezbollah's recent use of violence against fellow Lebanese has exposed that group for what it really is: selfish, power-hungry extremists who do not represent the interests of their fellow Lebanese, who will do anything, with the backing of Iran and Syria, to impose their will on their fellow citizens. Our challenge now is to help Lebanon's decent leaders and citizens take advantage of this moment – to help them continue building a government in Beirut that embodies aspirations, advances interests, ensures the security of Lebanon and its neighbors, and delivers for the Lebanese people, particularly the poorest and most disadvantaged.

This brings us to another such opportunity, and that is with the Palestinians and the current effort to end the conflict and build an effective, peaceful Palestinian state. A comprehensive peace, including Lebanon, Syria, and other members of the Arab League, is a worthy goal. And we do appreciate the effort that our ally, Turkey, is making to support a

peace between Israel and Syria. The key is to pursue all avenues of peace, but while maintaining focus on the Palestinian track because it is the most advanced and because it is supported by the community, the international community, as a whole.

The opportunity before us has been created by painstaking work since 2001, painstaking work that rejected the leadership of Yasser Arafat and said that it could not be that peace would be made by a corrupt leader who had one foot in terrorism. (Applause.)

Instead, the Administration set out a different approach. We said that revolving – resolving permanent status issues is necessary, but not sufficient, to create a Palestinian state. What are also needed are decent Palestinian leaders who fight terrorism, provide opportunity, and strengthen a culture of tolerance among their people. After all, who believes that peace can really be possible if textbooks and television teach children to hate? (Applause.)

Difficult decisions taken in the first term have now helped to create conditions for present opportunities. As in Iraq, in Lebanon, and other places in the region, responsible leaders and citizens have now emerged in the Palestinian territories. They are trying to realign their society around values of non-violence. And it is absolutely critical to our security, and to Israel's security, that these Palestinian leaders succeed, and that their fight against violent extremism is won. They need to know that in this, their fight is our fight, and that we cannot be neutral in their struggle.

President Abbas is the legitimate, elected leader of all Palestinians, and he and his government are working to prevent their society from becoming a beachhead for violent extremism – a goal that leaders of Hamas are trying to further by any means necessary. The situation in Gaza is deeply troubling to us all. But Hamas's willingness to terrorize innocent Palestinians and innocent Israelis is not the result of our policies. Nor is it proof that we need somehow a change in that policy. The problem is not a failure to communicate with Hamas. Indeed, how can any state negotiate with a group that sees every truce, every agreement, not as a compromise to advance peace, but as a tactic to prepare for war? (Applause.) No – the only responsible policy is to work with decent Palestinians who want and should be able to end the occupation that began in 1967, but also to isolate Hamas until it chooses to behave like a peaceful political party, not a terrorist group.

The expansion of violent extremism in the Middle East makes the creation of a peaceful, effective Palestinian state more urgent, not less. A responsible Palestinian state, just like a responsible Iraqi state or a Lebanese state, could anchor our common values in the region, therefore blunting the advance of our enemies. The present opportunity is not perfect by any means, but it is better than any other in several years, and we need to seize it. We need to take this chance to advance the historic and long-held aspirations of Israelis and Palestinians. Israelis have waited too long for the security they desire and deserve. And Palestinians have waited too long, amid daily humiliations, for the dignity of an independent state.

The Annapolis process is affirmed by leaders on both sides – by Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas. And it is being pursued by chief negotiators, Foreign Minister Livni, and, chief negotiator, Prime Minister – former Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei. Prime Minister Fayyad and Defense Minister Barak are working together to try to improve conditions for Palestinians on the ground. We still believe that we have a chance to reach an agreement on the basic contours of a peaceful Palestinian state. I know that this is ambitious, but if we can pursue this goal by the end of the year, it will be an historic breakthrough for people who believe in peace. The goal itself, though, will endure beyond the current U.S. leadership. I believe that the Administration's approach to this will and must endure. This means the need

to support responsible Palestinians in building a democratic state from the ground up that has both the will and the means to fight terrorism.

Ending this conflict will require difficult and painful sacrifices on both sides. But these are choices that Israelis can and should make confidently. Israel has a long and venerable tradition of holding itself to the highest standards of justice, and working magnanimously to seize the opportunity for peace with its neighbors. Israel has so much to offer the Middle East – politically, economically, culturally, and educationally. And one of the great tragedies of this conflict is that the nations of the region have missed the opportunity for their own enrichment that will come with peace with Israel.

The United States has a vital interest in peace between Israelis and Palestinians. We will, though, defend against any action that would compromise Israel's security. So Israel can be bold in its pursuit for peace – for the United States is fully behind her, and fully committed to her security. (Applause.)

I've had the honor and the pleasure of knowing many Israeli leaders and patriots. One of them was Ariel Sharon. (Applause.) I last visited with Ariel Sharon before his stroke on his farm. And he knew that I was a city girl, and so he took me out to visit his sheep. It was quite an experience for me; I had never been face to face with a sheep. (Laughter.) And I talked with him by phone not too long after that, and he said – I said to him, "How are your sheep?" And he assured me that they missed him – missed me.

Now, we had a wonderful relationship because I saw him as a man of courage and a man who deeply believed in the democratic Jewish state, but also in the desire for peace. And he once told me a story that I will never forget. It was before Israel's disengagement from Gaza, and he said that he went out to talk with Israeli settlers, because he, of course, had been the father of the settlement movement. He went to one family and he explained to them why it was important to share the land. And this man said, "Let me show you something." And he showed Sharon the *mezuzah* above their house, and he told Sharon, "You personally put that *mezuzah* there. You told us that this was good for Israel, for us to settle here, and now you tell us that we have to leave for the good of Israel." Sharon was deeply pained by that. I could see it even as he told the story. But that is what great leaders do: They make hard decisions confidently for the sake of peace.

So as Israel's leaders join with us to make hard decisions, let us do it together and in the spirit of friendship and shared values that sustains us both. And let us go on to secure for all times what David Ben-Gurion has called, "the legacy of a small nation, which has endured great suffering and tribulations, but which is, nevertheless, great and eternal in spirit, vision, faith and virtue."

Thank you very much, and God bless you. (Applause.)

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