# Senator Menendez Delivers Remarks to 2017 AIPAC Policy Conference

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Senator Bob Menendez

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – *U.S. Senator Bob Menendez delivered the following remarks this morning at the 2017 AIPAC Policy Conference*:

“Every year, when I stand at this podium, when I look out into this convention hall, I see a room full of leaders and advocates I am proud to call my friends.

“People like Howard Kohr, like Madam President Lillian Pinkus, like New Jersey’s own Mort Fridman, and of course, the hundreds of AIPAC members here today representing the Great State of New Jersey. It is always an honor for me not just to speak with you but to join hands with you, to be among people of all ages, all faiths, and all political persuasions who stand together and stand tall for a strong U.S.-Israel relationship.

“Those of you who know me know three things:  First, you know that I believe it is in the best interests of the United States to have a strong, unwavering, unyielding, unbreakable bond with the State of Israel.  Second, you know that I believe in the right of the Jewish people to live in peace and security in the indisputable homeland of their ancestors.

“And finally, you know that no matter which way the political winds are blowing, or which way the news cycle is going, when it comes to standing up for Israel, you will never – ever– find me spinning like a weathervane,  but rather a strong moral compass that bears due east the 5,879 miles from Washington to Jerusalem.

“You know that I will not be intimidated by political opponents.  I will never hesitate to disagree with my closest friends, I will never shy away from standing up to any President, of any party.  And while I’ve paid a price for my beliefs, I would do so all over again.   
  
“Recent events have reminded us that we live in challenging times. Times that demand free people around the world remain resolute and united in humanity’s long struggle against fear and terror, and hate.  Just this past week, we were saddened by a terrorist attack in the heart of London that killed five people and injured 50 others. All it took was 82 seconds.

“Of course, the Israeli people need no reminder of how quickly an act of terror can unfold.  They’ve lived under siege for decades, enduring rocket attacks, and suicide bombings, and street stabbings.  Always praying for peace, and yet always painfully aware of the reality -- a reality that Prime Minister Netanyahu captured so eloquently when he said ‘If the Arabs put down their weapons today, there would be no more violence. If the Jews put down their weapons today, there would be no more Israel.’

“Those simple words carry a powerful truth – the recognition that Israel can never let its guard down. That’s why last year I was proud to help secure our record-breaking $38 billion Memorandum of Understanding, which you all advocated for, an agreement that ensures that Israel’s defenses will remain unmatched in the region.  And that together, the United States and Israel will continue developing defense technologies of astounding sophistication like the Iron Dome, David’s Sling, and the Arrow 3 missile defense systems.

“That’s also why I will continue to stand against budgets that propose that we defund U.S. foreign aid entirely. Because in addition to the security assistance we provide allies like Israel, we know that when America promotes human rights and women’s rights globally, when we bring economic opportunity to where there is poverty, when we promote education over extremism, both the United States and Israel reap the benefits of greater stability and security.

“So as members of AIPAC working to ensure continued military assistance for Israel, I want to thank you and commend you for also advocating that the United States continue to fully fund foreign aid and diplomatic outreach as well.

“Now as AIPAC members, you understand the gravity of the challenges that confront us, both for our national security and for the security of Israel.  Today, we see extremism and hate casting dark shadows around the world.  We see a cynical, intentional effort to delegitimize the State of Israel in the international community, in the global economy, and even academia.  And finally, we see an Iranian regime that has - in my view quite predictably - been emboldened by sanctions relief and is more committed than ever to destabilizing the Middle East.

“Each of these threats are serious in themselves.  But to have them converging all at once should make one thing clear:  In times like these, we cannot afford a shred of daylight between the United States and Israel. That’s why earlier this year, I refused to stand silent when the United States abstained from a UN Security Council vote that was unabashedly biased against Israel, and ultimately detrimental to the cause of peace.  That’s also why I co-introduced Senate Res. 6, strongly objecting to its passage.

“The U.N. Security Council can’t pass a resolution condemning Iran’s violation of ballistic missile testing.  It can’t pass a resolution to stop the humanitarian strife in Syria.  It can’t condemn Russia for indiscriminately bombing civilians in Aleppo. And yet it endorses a biased resolution that pins every wrong in the Middle East on the one nation that stands up for what’s right. A resolution that allows terrorist organizations like Hamas to shirk any responsibility in the routine incitement of Palestinian violence. A resolution that emboldens hardliners who will seize it to advance their own agendas.

“It was wrong to betray our longstanding commitment to defending Israel on the world stage precisely because it is our one reliable and steadfast ally in the Middle East.  It was wrong to condone a biased resolution that treats Israel as the source of all things broken in the region.  And it was wrong to abstain at a moment when the world needs the United States of America to stand up for our values, to speak up for our allies, and to lead by the power of our example.

“Unfortunately, the United Nations is not the only place where Israel confronts this double standard.  A double standard that increasingly seems little more than anti-Semitism in disguise.  Which leads me to address directly, for a moment, the young people among us, I hear there are about 4,000 of you here today. The college students and high school students here today, perhaps for your very first Policy Conference.  I want to thank you for being here and I want to thank you for standing tall for Israel, not just today but every day.

“I know that it isn’t always easy. Many of you are facing firsthand a movement to discredit and disparage Israel on campuses across America and around the world. I’m not talking about the kind of fruitful exchanges of different perspectives we welcome at our universities. College is, after all, a time to meet people with passionate beliefs that differ from your own.

“I’m talking about a movement that has crept into other causes you care deeply, about a movement increasingly forcing you to stay silent if you want to take an active role in campus politics, or in some cases, to check your love of Israel outside the doors of classrooms.

“I’m referring of course to the growing Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement. A campaign to boycott Israeli goods and Israeli scholars that treats the only democratic, free-market economy in the Middle East as the cause of all the region’s challenges.  The last time I checked, Israel stands alone in a desert full of despots that have no regard for democratic freedoms, human rights, and the rule of law.

“Let me be clear: I reject the BDS movement, whether it be on campuses in France and London or right here in the United States of America.  BDS activists turn the other way as Bashar al Assad and Vladimir Putin bomb civilians without hesitation. They ignore the cries of people being persecuted in Venezuela or Cuba.

“And they claim the mantle of free speech to defend this smear campaign against Israel, they demand that Israeli academics in every field of study be silenced, that students who are Jewish, who are pro-Israel, and who believe in a lasting and secure home for the Jewish people, are silenced.

“But we must not be silent.  We must stand together to ensure that the letters B.D.S. are seen for what they are— bias directed solely at one people and one country by those who should know better.  And as a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, I will use every avenue at my disposal to call out a movement stained by anti-Semitism.

“Whether it is the delegitimization of Israel by the UN, the intimidation and isolation promoted by BDS, or the white nationalist dog whistles blown by Steve Bannon from the West Wing, it is up to all of us to stand up, to stand together and to speak out against anti-Semitism in all its forms.

“And that includes raising our voices together in rejection of anti-Semitism’s close friends: racism and xenophobia.  We see these forces of fear and division in the Administration’s support for policies that profile immigrants based on their chosen religion, the color of their complexion, and their nation of origin. And we hear it in the rhetoric designed to stoke fear of Syrian refugees.  Rhetoric that demonizes innocent families calling out for refuge from the terrorists in ISIS, refuge from the bombs dropped by Vladimir Putin, refuge from the brutal dictatorship of Bashar al Assad.

“The scope of the humanitarian crisis spurred by the conflict in Syria reminds us that the entire Middle East is increasingly under siege.  And for Israel, the threats posed by further instability are obvious. The increasing volatility we see only intensifies the deep concern felt by U.S. allies and partners – especially throughout the Gulf – that Iran will emerge as a nuclear-armed power.

“As you all know, I’ve spent the better part of my 25 years in the House and Senate helping craft an extensive network of sanctions.  Sanctions that ultimately weakened the Iranian economy and drove the regime to the negotiating table. Those sanctions were working exactly as intended. And I believe we should have pressed for more meaningful concessions, and put more stringent constraints on Iran’s nuclear capability in place.

“Whether you supported the Iranian nuclear agreement – or opposed it as I did – surely we can all agree that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose an existential threat to Israel and an unacceptable threat to America’s national security. Surely we can all agree that the time limits imposed on this regime are only a blink of an eye when we consider Iran’s long history.  We cannot deny that in a decade, we may be facing an Iran equipped with an unacceptable nuclear breakout time.

“Look, I know I don’t need to tell this audience where the Iran nuclear agreement fell short.   But as I said when I voted against that deal, if Iran is to acquire a nuclear bomb, it will not have my name on it.

“Many of us rightly predicted that an Iranian regime that prioritized funding terrorism over the wellbeing of its own citizens would see sanctions relief as a cash windfall for their terrorist proxies across the region.  And on terrorism, we feared that much of Iran’s new economic capacity would be used to propagate violence against Jews.

“It is no surprise then that Iran has not suddenly transformed into a responsible member of the international community.  Rather it remains an agent of instability throughout the Middle East, a nefarious actor that continues to undermine American national security interests and our efforts to partner with countries throughout the region working to protect civilians and build democratic governance structures.

“Consider Syria.  Even as the United States and our partners make progress at beating back ISIS, and work together to deliver desperately- needed humanitarian relief to besieged civilians, Bashar Al-Assad presses on with his brutal campaign. And let’s be honest: we all know that Assad’s continued grip on power is thanks in large part to his allies in Moscow and his friends in Tehran.  By aiding Assad, Russia is prolonging this conflict, all for the purpose of trying to maintain one friendly government in the Middle East who will stand by its own brutal leader.

“Meanwhile, as Russian bombs rain down on Syrian hospitals, as Russian bombs rain down on Syrian homes, as Russian bombs rain down on humanitarian aid convoys, Putin is content to sit back and watch Western Europe struggle with the displacement of millions of people -- all the while spreading white nationalist and anti-Semitic propaganda aimed at swaying elections and undermining the post-World War II international order.

“Simultaneously, the Iranian regime is emboldened by sanctions relief and undeniably invested in Assad’s grip on power.  Iran continues to funnel cash and weapons to its pro-Assad, terrorist proxy Hezbollah – weapons that at a moment’s notice could be turned on Israel.   Israel has every right to be concerned, and every right to defend itself against any and all threats.

“Throughout this harrowing conflict in Syria, Israel has shown extraordinary restraint and a laser-like focus on defending the security of its people. But as this conflict literally at times spills over its border, no country can endure this kind of provocation for long, and we may be facing a change in calculus.

“In recent days, we saw Syria launch missiles at Israeli air forces as they returned from destroying a convoy of weapons headed to the terrorists in Hezbollah. Those missiles triggered Israel’s missile defense system for the first time since the conflict began.

“My friends, this is not a time to be naïve.  Iran’s motives are no mystery.  Its goal – to extend the influence of its government throughout the region – remains unchanged. Iran continues to support terrorist proxies like Hezbollah. It continues its provocative testing of ballistic missiles. It continues to disregard its international obligations, including its likely violation of a U.N. arms embargo.

”And the United States cannot let this destabilizing, aggressive behavior go unchecked.  That’s why I have worked with my colleagues – Democrats and Republicans – those who supported the nuclear deal and those who did not – to introduce the Countering Iran’s Destabilizing Activities Act just last week.

“With no indication this Administration has any proactive strategy to counter Iran, the time is ripe for Congress to assert its influence in our foreign policy, to provide guidance and to develop a framework for securing our interests in the region.  This bill contains meaningful steps to counter Iran’s most egregious behavior – and I want to thank all of you for your steadfast support of it as you head to Capitol Hill today.

“It also calls for a regional strategy to counter Iran’s asymmetric and conventional threats in the region. This includes specific plans to engage our partners in the Gulf to work together to counter Iranian efforts to destabilize recognized governments, to stop Iranian harassment and interference in international shipping lanes, and to stop Iranian support for terrorist groups like Hezbollah and irregular Shia forces in places like Iraq.

“This bill also imposes sanctions on anyone who contributes materially or financially to Iran’s ballistic missile program.  Iran has test-fired numerous ballistic missiles over the past few months, several bearing the words ‘Israel must be wiped off the earth.’  And in January, the U.N. itself expressed concern that Iran’s efforts to supply weapons and missiles to Hezbollah was in direct violation of a U.N. arms embargo. That’s why this legislation imposes sanctions on anyone involved in such activities – ensuring that those who violate arms embargoes are held accountable.

“And to counter Iran’s threatening support for terrorists, our bill imposes terrorism-related sanctions on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, far beyond the Quds Force, the Iranian regime’s main exporter of terrorism.  Likewise, it preserves sanctions imposed by executive order on individuals who support terror. Inside Iran, we know this regime continues to abuse basic human rights. That’s why our bill authorizes the President to sanction individuals who perpetuate human rights abuses through extrajudicial killings, the use of torture, and unjust detention.  Indeed, we must never lose sight of those Americans who suffer at the hands of the Iranian regime - including those who have been unjustly detained, and those who have remained missing in Iran for more than a decade.

“Now is not the time for the United States to turn a blind eye to Iran’s hostile behavior. Now is the time for all of us to demand nothing less than vigorous oversight, constant vigilance, and strict enforcement of our entire arsenal of diplomatic tools, including sanctions and pressure, on Iran.

“Let me conclude today with a message to those here in this room who perhaps feel riddled sometimes by self-doubt, or uncertain of the future.  I’m reminded of the words of Israel’s fearless and first-ever Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion. He said that ‘to be a realist in Israel, you must believe in miracles.’

“To every member of AIPAC, I urge you to heed those words. One battle lost should not undermine a bold vision. Remember, Israel was not founded on small ideas, but on bold principles.

“I won’t deny that in times like these, with anti-Semitism on the rise, with Iran emboldened, with instability surrounding Israel at every turn, the path to a Jewish Democratic State of Israel secure at home and at peace with its neighbors may seem elusive – at times maybe even impossible.

“It is in these times that we must strive to be those realists who believe in miracles.

“We must remember why we are pro-Israel – a position that I have always believed is one derived from the better angels of our nature.  Hope over fear. Democracy over despotism. Human rights over hatred.  In times like these, we must stay true to those better angels. We must reject those who say security and idealism are opposing goals instead of partners in peace.

“Together, we must stand unflinchingly and unapologetically for the safety and security of the state of Israel.  All the while keeping our hands open and extended in the hopes that someday, we feel the palm of another placed in ours – the palm of a fellow believer in miracles, the palm of a partner ready to work with Israel to fulfill the promise of peace.

“Remember that David Ben-Gurion believed in the promise – the miracle – of the modern State of Israel long before Hitler’s rise to power. Back when he was a young man, picking oranges on a kibbutz in 1906.  So let us always remember that the argument for Israel’s existence is borne out by history.  By farmers who made the desert green, by the discoveries of Nobel Prize Winners, by the innovation of entrepreneurs, by a people not content to dream of miracles – but bold enough to realize them.

“As President John F. Kennedy said, ‘Israel was not created in order to disappear - Israel will endure and flourish. It is the child of hope and the home of the brave. It can neither be broken by adversity nor demoralized by success. It carries the shield of democracy and it honors the sword of freedom.’

“Together, we must be that shield, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Israel in the face of adversity.  That’s why you are here in Washington. And that’s why I’m here standing with you. Standing up for an Israel that is capable of defending itself against any and all threats.  Standing up for a nation that is not merely accepted but admired on the world stage.

“Israel. Strong. Democratic. Jewish. And everlasting.

“Shalom.”