



**March 21, 2016**

**President Robert Cohen  
American Israel Public Affairs Committee  
251 H Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20001**

**Dear Bob,**

**Here are my remarks as promised.**

**Best,**

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bernie".

**Senator Bernie Sanders**

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## Remarks on Middle East Policy

Senator Bernard Sanders

Salt Lake City, Utah

March 21, 2016

I was invited along with other presidential candidates to be at the AIPAC conference in Washington, but obviously I could not make it because we are here.

The issues that AIPAC is dealing with are very important issues and I wanted to give the same speech here as I would have given if we were at that conference.

Let me begin by saying that I think I am probably the only candidate for president who has personal ties with Israel. I spent a number of months there when I was a young man on a kibbutz, so I know a little bit about Israel.

Clearly, the United States and Israel are united by historical ties. We are united by culture. We are united by our values, including a deep commitment to democratic principles, civil rights and the rule of law.

Israel is one of America's closest allies, and we – as a nation – are committed not just to guaranteeing Israel's survival, but also to making sure that its people have a right to live in peace and security.

To my mind, as friends – long-term friends with Israel – we are *obligated* to speak the truth as we see it. That is what real friendship demands, especially in difficult times.

Our disagreements will come and go, and we must weather them constructively.

But it is important among friends to be honest and truthful about differences that we may have.

America and Israel have faced great challenges together. We have supported each other, and we will continue to do just that as we face a very daunting challenge and that is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

I am here to tell the American people that, if elected president, I will work tirelessly to advance the cause of peace as a partner and as a friend to Israel.

But to be successful, we have also got to be a friend not only to Israel, but to the Palestinian people, where in Gaza unemployment today is 44 percent and we have there a poverty rate which is almost as high.

So when we talk about Israel and Palestinian areas, it is important to understand that today there is a whole lot of suffering among Palestinians and that cannot be ignored. You can't have good policy that results in peace if you ignore one side.

The road toward peace will be difficult. Wonderful people, well-intentioned people have tried decade after decade to achieve that and it will not be easy. I cannot tell you exactly how it will look – I do not believe anyone can – but I firmly believe that the only prospect for peace is the successful negotiation of a two-state solution.

The first step in that road ahead is to set the stage for resuming the peace process through direct negotiations. Progress is never made unless people are prepared to sit down and talk to each other. This is no small thing. It means building confidence on both sides, offering some signs of good faith, and then proceeding to talks when conditions permit them to be constructive. Again, this is not easy, but that is the direction we've got to go.

This will require compromises on both sides, but I believe it can be done. I believe that Israel, the Palestinians, and the international community can, must, and will rise to the occasion and do what needs to be done to achieve a lasting peace in a region of the world that has seen so much war, so much conflict and so much suffering.

Peace will require the unconditional recognition by all people of Israel's right to exist. It will require an end to attacks of all kinds against Israel.

Peace will require that organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah renounce their efforts to undermine the security of Israel. It will require the entire world to recognize Israel.

Peace has to mean security for every Israeli from violence and terrorism.

But peace *also* means security for every Palestinian. It means achieving self-determination, civil rights, and economic well-being for the Palestinian people.

Peace will mean ending what amounts to the occupation of Palestinian territory, establishing mutually agreed upon borders, and pulling back settlements in the West Bank, just as Israel did in Gaza – once considered an unthinkable move on Israel's part.

That is why I join much of the international community, including the U.S. State Department and European Union, in voicing my concern that Israel's recent expropriation of an additional 579 acres of land in the West Bank undermines the peace process and, ultimately, Israeli security as well.

It is absurd for elements within the Netanyahu government to suggest that building *more* settlements in the West Bank is the appropriate response to the most recent violence. It is also not acceptable that the Netanyahu government decided to withhold hundreds of millions of shekels in tax revenue from the Palestinians, which it is supposed to collect on their behalf.

But, by the same token, it is also unacceptable for President Abbas to call for the abrogation of the Oslo Agreement when the goal should be the *ending* of violence.

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Peace will also mean ending the economic blockade of Gaza. And it will mean a sustainable and equitable distribution of precious water resources so that Israel and Palestine can both thrive as neighbors.

Right now, Israel controls 80 percent of the water reserves in the West Bank. Inadequate water supply has contributed to the degradation and desertification of Palestinian land. A lasting peace will have to recognize Palestinians are entitled to control their own lives and there is nothing human life needs more than water.

Peace will require strict adherence by both sides to the tenets of international humanitarian law. This includes Israel ending disproportionate responses to being attacked – even though *any* attack on Israel is unacceptable.

We recently saw a dramatic example of just how important this concept is. In 2014, the decades-old conflict escalated once more as Israel launched a major military campaign against Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli offensive came after weeks of indiscriminate rocket fire into its territory and the kidnapping of Israeli citizens.

Of course, I strongly object to Hamas' long held position that Israel does not have the right to exist – that is unacceptable. Of course, I strongly condemn indiscriminate rocket fire by Hamas into Israeli territory, and Hamas' use of civilian neighborhoods to launch those attacks. I condemn the fact that Hamas diverted funds and materials for much-needed construction projects designed to improve the quality of life of the Palestinian people, and instead used those funds to construct a network of tunnels for military purposes.

However, let me also be very clear: I – along with many supporters of Israel – spoke out strongly against the Israeli counterattacks that killed nearly 1,500 civilians and wounded thousands more. I condemned the bombing of hospitals, schools and refugee camps.

Today, Gaza is still largely in ruins. The international community must come together to help Gaza recover. That doesn't mean rebuilding factories that produce bombs and missiles – but it does mean rebuilding schools, homes and hospitals that are vital to the future of the Palestinian people.

These are difficult subjects. They are hard to talk about both for many Americans and for Israelis. I recognize that, but it is clear to me that the path toward peace will require tapping into our shared humanity to make hard but just decisions.

Nobody can tell you when peace will be achieved between Israel and the Palestinians. No one knows the exact order that compromises will have to be made to reach a viable two-state solution. But as we undertake that work together, the United States will continue its unwavering commitment to the safety of Israeli citizens and the country of Israel.

Let me just say a word about an overall agenda for the Middle East.

Of course, beyond the Palestinian question, Israel finds itself in the midst of a region in severe upheaval.

First, the so-called Islamic State – ISIS – threatens the security of the entire region and beyond, including our own country and our allies. Secretary of State Kerry was right to say that ISIS is committing genocide, and there is no doubt in my mind that the United States must continue to participate in an international coalition to destroy this barbaric organization.

While obviously much needs to be done, so far our effort has had some important progress, as airstrikes have degraded ISIS' military capacity, and the group has lost more than 20 percent of its territory in the past year.

So we are making some progress.

But we are entering a difficult period in the campaign against ISIS.

The government in Baghdad has yet to achieve a sustainable political order that unites Iraq's various ethnic and sectarian factions, which has limited its ability to sustain military victories against ISIS. Unless there is a united government, it's going to be hard to be effective in destroying ISIS.

More inclusive, stable governance in Iraq will be vital to inflict a lasting defeat on ISIS. Otherwise, ISIS could regain its influence or another, similar organization may spring up in its place.

In Syria, the challenges are even more difficult. The fractured nature of the civil war there has often diluted the fight against ISIS – exemplified by the Russian airstrikes that prioritized hitting anti-Assad fighters rather than ISIS. And, just like in Iraq, ISIS cannot be defeated until the groups that take territory from ISIS can responsibly govern the areas they take back. Ultimately, this will require a political framework for all of Syria.

The U.S. must also play a greater role disrupting the financing of ISIS and efforts on the Internet to turn disaffected youth into a new generation of terrorists.

While the U.S. has an important role to play in defeating ISIS, that struggle must be led by the Muslim countries themselves on the ground. I agree with King Abdullah of Jordan who a number of months ago said that what is going on there right now is nothing less than a battle for the soul of Islam and the only people who will effectively destroy ISIS there will be Muslim troops on the ground.

So what we need is a coalition of those countries.

Now, I am *not* suggesting that Saudi Arabia or any other states in the region invade other countries, nor unilaterally intervene in conflicts driven in part by sectarian tensions.

What I *am* saying is that the major powers in the region – especially the Gulf States – have to take greater responsibility for the future of the Middle East and the defeat of ISIS.

What I *am* saying is that countries like Qatar – which intends to spend up to \$200 billion to host the 2022 World Cup – Qatar which per capita is the wealthiest nation in the world – Qatar can do more to contribute to the fight Against ISIS. If they are prepared to spend \$200 billion for a soccer tournament, then they have got to spend a lot spend a lot more against a barbaric organization.

What I *am also* saying is that other countries in the region – like Saudi Arabia, which has the 4<sup>th</sup> largest defense budget in the world – has to dedicate itself more fully to the destruction of ISIS, instead of other military adventures like the one it is pursuing right now in Yemen.

And keep in mind that while ISIS is obviously a dangerous and formidable enemy, ISIS has only 30,000 fighters on the ground. So when we ask the nations in the region to stand up to do more against ISIS – nations in the region which have millions of men and women under arms – we know it is surely within their capability to destroy ISIS.

Now the United States has every right in the world to insist on these points. Remember – I want everybody to remember – that not so many years ago it was the United States and our troops that reinstalled the royal family in Kuwait after Saddam Hussein's invasion in 1990. We put these people back on the throne. Now they have the obligation to work with us and other countries to destroy ISIS.

The very wealthy – and some of these countries are extraordinarily wealthy from oil money or gas money – these very wealthy and powerful nations in the region can no longer expect the United States to do their work for them. Uncle Sam cannot and should not do it all. We are not the policeman of the world.

As we continue a strongly coordinated effort against ISIS, the United States and other western nations should be *supportive* of efforts to fight ISIS and al-Qaeda. But it is the countries in the region that have to stand up against these violently extremist and brutal organizations.

Now I realize that given the geopolitics of the region this is not going to be easy. I realize that there are very strong and historical disagreements between different countries in the region about how ISIS should be dealt with. I realize different countries have different priorities. But we can help set the agenda and mobilize stronger collective action to defeat ISIS in a *lasting* way.

Bottom line is the countries in the region – countries which by the way are most threatened by ISIS – they're going to have to come together, they're going to have to work out their compromises, they are going to have to lead the effort with the support of the United States and other major powers in destroying ISIS.

Another major challenge in the region, of course, is the Syrian Civil War itself – one of the worst humanitarian disasters in recent history.



After five years of brutal conflict, the only solution in Syria will be, in my view, a negotiated political settlement. Those who advocate for stronger military involvement by the U.S. to oust Assad from power have not paid close enough attention to history. That would simply prolong the war and increase the chaos in Syria, not end it.

In other words, we all recognize that Assad is a brutal dictator. But I think that our priorities right now have got to be destroy ISIS, and work out a political settlement with Russia and Iran to get Assad out of power.

I applaud Secretary Kerry and the Obama administration for negotiating a partial ceasefire between the Assad regime and most opposition forces. The ceasefire shows the value of American-led diplomacy, rather than escalating violence. It may not seem like a lot, but it is. Diplomacy in this instance has had some real success.

Let me also say what I think most Americans now understand, that for a great military power like the United States it is easy to use a war to remove a tyrant from power, but it is much more difficult to comprehend the day after that tyrant is removed from power and a political vacuum occurs.

All of us know what has occurred in Iraq. We got rid of Saddam Hussein, a brutal, brutal murderer and a tyrant. And yet we created massive instability in that region which led to the creation of ISIS. I am very proud to have been one of the members in Congress to vote against that disastrous war.

And the situation is not totally dissimilar from what has happened in Libya. We got rid of a terrible dictator there, Colonel Gaddafi, but right now chaos has erupted and ISIS now has a foothold in that area.

The bottom line is that regime change for a major power like us is not hard. But understanding what happens afterward is something that always has got to be taken into consideration.

In my view, the military option for a powerful nation like ours – the most powerful nation in the world – should always be on the table. That's why we have the most powerful military in the world. But it should always be the last resort, not the first resort.

Another major challenge in the region is Iran, which routinely destabilizes the Middle East and threatens the security of Israel.

Now, I think all of us agree that Iran must not be able to acquire a nuclear weapon. That would just destabilize the entire region and create disastrous consequences.

Where we may disagree is how to achieve that goal. I personally strongly supported the nuclear deal with the United States, France, China, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and Iran because it is the best hope to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon.

I want to thank the Obama administration for doing a very good job under very, very difficult circumstances.

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I believe we have an obligation to pursue diplomatic solutions before resorting to military intervention.

You know it is very easy for politicians to go before the people and talk about how tough we are, and how we want to wipe out everybody else. But I think if we have learned anything from history it is that we pursue every diplomatic option before we resort to military intervention.

And interestingly enough, more often than not, diplomacy can achieve goals that military intervention cannot achieve. And that is why I supported the sanctions that *brought* Iran to the negotiating table and allowed us to reach an agreement.

But let me tell you what I firmly believe. The bottom line is this: if successfully implemented – and I think it can be – the nuclear deal will prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. And preventing Iran from getting the bomb makes the world a safer place.

Does the agreement achieve everything I would like? Of course not.

But to my mind, it is far better than the path we were on with Iran developing nuclear weapons and the potential for military intervention by the United States and Israel growing greater by the day.

I do not accept the idea that the “pro-Israel” position was to oppose the deal.

Preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon will strengthen not only the United States’ security, but Israel’s security as well.

And I am not alone in that idea. While Prime Minister Netanyahu is vocally opposed to the accord, his is hardly a consensus opinion in Israel and it’s important that everyone understand that. Dozens of former security officials, including retired Army generals and chiefs of the Shin Bet and Mossad intelligence agencies support the agreement. Netanyahu may not, but many others in Israel do.

But let me be clear: if Iran does not live up to the agreement, we should re-impose sanctions and all options are back on the table.

Moreover, the deal does not mean we let Iran’s aggressive acts go unchecked. The world must stand united in condemning Iran’s recent ballistic missile tests as well as its continued support for terrorism through groups like Hezbollah.

Going forward, I believe we need a longer-term vision for dealing with Iran that balances two important objectives.

First, we must counter the destabilizing behavior of Iran’s leaders.

But secondly we must also leave the door open to more diplomacy to encourage Iranian moderates and the segments of the Iranian people – especially the younger generations – who want a better relationship with the West. While only a small step in the right direction, I was



heartened by the results of the recent parliamentary elections in which Iranian voters elected moderates in what was, in part, a referendum on the nuclear deal.

I know that some say there is just no dealing with Iran – in any way at all – for the foreseeable future. And that is the position of some. After all, Iran is in a competition with Saudi Arabia and its allies for influence over that region.

But a more balanced approach toward Iran that serves our national security interests should hardly be a radical idea. We have serious concerns about the nature of the Iranian government, but we have to be honest enough, and sometimes we are not, to admit that Saudi Arabia – a repressive regime in its own right – is hardly an example of Jeffersonian democracy.

Balancing firmness with willingness to engage with diplomacy in dealing with Iran will not be easy. But it is the wisest course of action to help improve the long-term prospects of stability and peace in the Middle East – and to keep us safe.

Lastly, these are but some – not all – of the major issues where the interests of Israel intersect with those of the United States. I would address these issues and challenges as I would most issues and that is by having an honest discussion and by bringing people together.

The truth is there are good people on both sides who want peace, And the other truth is there are despots and liars on both sides who benefit from continued antagonism.

I would conclude by saying there is a disturbing trend among some of the Republicans in this presidential election that take a very, very different approach. And their approach I think would be a disaster for this country. The Republican front-runner, Donald Trump, suggested limiting immigration according to religion and creating a national database based on religion – something unprecedented in our country's history.

Now this would not only go against everything we stand for as a nation, but also – in terms of our relationship to the rest of the world – it would be a disaster.

Let me just conclude by saying this: the issues that I've discussed today are not going to be easily solved. Everybody knows that. But I think the United States has the opportunity, as the most powerful nation on earth, to play an extraordinary role in trying to bring people together – to try to put together coalitions in the region to destroy ISIS.

And that is a responsibility that I, if elected president, would accept in a very, very serious way. We have seen too many wars, too much killing, too much suffering. And let us all together – people of good faith – do everything we can to finally, finally bring peace and stability to that region.

Thank you all very much.