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The White House

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Remarks by National Security Advisor Susan Rice at the American Jewish Committee

Global Forum

National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice

Remarks to the American Jewish Committee Global Forum

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Monday, June 6, 2016

Good evening, everyone. Thank you, Stan Bergman, for that introduction and for your extraordinary leadership. It's not easy being president. I'm reminded of the time, shortly after the establishment of Israel, when President Truman and President Weizmann were comparing the respective burdens of their offices. Truman said, "Mr. President, you're lucky to have such a little country. How'd you like to be president of 140 million people?"—which was the U.S. population at the time. Weizmann replied, "Yes, but how would you like to be president of one million presidents?" So, *mazel tov* to AJC's incoming president, John Shapiro—and good luck.

I also want to pay my respects to David Harris, a deeply thoughtful and tenacious advocate, an excellent sounding board, and a friend who has stood by me during some difficult moments. It's great to be here with so many other distinguished leaders from around the world, including my fellow "Women of the World"—High Representative Mogherini and Foreign Secretary Ruiz Massieu.

The last time I spoke to AJC was at the Women's Leadership Board's luncheon in New York in 2013. I was finishing up as United Nations ambassador. In those days, I spent a good bit of time at AJC's headquarters on 56th Street. I had the privilege to join you several times. And, at that lunch, I was deeply moved to receive AJC's Distinguished Service Award, in recognition of the Obama Administration's staunch support for Israel. David thanked me for "standing tall," which I'm pretty sure he meant metaphorically.

So, being here feels a little like being with family—with *mishpacha*. I don't know how many people

know this, but I grew up in Shepherd Park, D.C., then a predominantly-Jewish neighborhood not that far from here. I watched worshippers walking to synagogue every week. Our house had a *mezuzah* on the door frame, and I attended many a *seder* with friends, reading from those Maxwell House *haggadahs* as we told the story of a people liberated from bondage. At a time when *bat mitvahs* were still rare, I went to more than most girls at the National Cathedral School. All my life, I've been inspired by the deep morality of the Jewish faith. By the simplicity and urgency of the command in Deuteronomy: *tzedek tzedek tirdof*. "Justice, justice you shall pursue."

For 110 years now, AJC has answered that call. You have been America's conscience—fighting for civil rights, reaching out to other faith communities, comforting the stranger new to our shores. More and more, as we recognize tonight, you've become the world's conscience as well, from battling apartheid in Stan's native South Africa to aiding refugees in Europe. I've been truly fortunate, as I've said, to work closely with you—at the UN and now as the President's National Security Advisor. I echo the assessment of my dear friend, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who says, "AJC remains indispensable. No one understands more clearly the need for vigilance and the danger of silence." So, on behalf of President Obama, thank you for more than a century of doing the sacred work of *tikun olam*, of building a better world for us all. If AJC were a person, it would be the biggest *mensch* around.

Next week is the festival of *Shavuot*. As Jews do every year, congregations around the world will read from the Book of Ruth, as Ruth pledges herself to her mother-in-law and to Israel: "Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God." That profound expression of family and faith—that joining together of fates—is the spirit animating the relationship between the people of the United States and the people of Israel. It's an ironclad bond. It's a solemn promise that endures *l'dor va'dor*, from generation to generation, ever since President Truman recognized Israel just 11 minutes after it declared independence. That doesn't mean we always agree on every issue. Like all of us, I'm sure the biblical Ruth sometimes didn't see eye-to-eye with her in-laws. But, as President Obama told the people of Israel when he visited Jerusalem, "So long as there is a United States of America... you are not alone."

For those of us who care about Israel, this is a time of concern and sometimes great sorrow. I know our hearts ache for the victims of recent violence—including Ezra Schwartz, an American *yeshiva* student, and Taylor Force, a veteran and Vanderbilt student, whose tragic losses we mourn deeply.

But, know this: when Hamas digs tunnels so they can kidnap and kill Israelis, Israel is not alone. When one country is singled out time and again on the floor of the United Nations, Israel is not alone. When angry voices attack Israel's right to exist, Israel is not alone. And, by the same token, when Palestinians are attacked by mobs shouting "Death to Arabs" and Palestinian homes, mosques, and churches are vandalized, the Palestinian people are not alone.

President Obama is fiercely devoted to Israel and to the well-being of the Jewish people. I know because I see it every day. I watched him as he slipped a folded prayer into the cracks of the Western Wall. I stood with him as we ran our hands over the charred remnants of rockets in Sderot. President Obama has met with Prime Minister Netanyahu 16 times—more than almost any other leader. Last December, President Obama hosted President Rivlin as he lit Hannukah candles at the White House—the first time an Israeli president has done so at the White House. Just a few months ago, Vice President Biden visited Israel again for a series of high-level meetings, which Prime Minister Netanyahu rightly called proof that our "relationship is strong in all areas."

Our commitment to Israel, as always, transcends partisanship. When Israel was barraged by rocket fire in 2014, the vote in the U.S. House of Representatives to support Israel was unanimous. The vote in the U.S. Senate was unanimous. That doesn't happen much these days. But, as the Members of Congress here tonight could tell you, Israel's security isn't a Democratic interest or a Republican interest—it's an enduring American interest.

So, when President Obama calls America's commitment to Israel's security "unshakeable," that's not just talk. It's the nearly \$24 billion the United States has provided since President Obama took office to help maintain Israel's qualitative military edge. It's the F-35s Israel will receive later this year—the only nation in the Middle East with this advanced aircraft. It's the billions we've invested in jointly developing and procuring Iron Dome and other missile defense technologies. When Hamas was raining down 100 rockets a day on Israel, those systems saved untold lives. So, we're doing even more. A few weeks ago, Israel successfully tested Iron Dome aboard ships. As we speak, Israel and our Department of Defense are developing anti-tunneling technology, the so-called "Underground Iron Dome." So, Israel's enemies are on notice: If you come at Israel by land, by sea, by air—even under the earth—you will lose.

The security cooperation between the United States and Israel doesn't stop there. Just ask Israel's past two defense ministers, who have each praised the closeness of our military ties. Our Special Forces train together. Our air forces and navies drill together. This month, American National Guard troops are traveling to Israel for a joint disaster response exercise. And, as the person who briefs the President every day on the threats we face around the world, including in the Middle East, I can attest that our intelligence sharing is at an all-time high.

President Obama is committed to ensuring Israel's security not just for the remainder of his time in office, but for years to come. Israel currently receives more than half of the United States' entire foreign military assistance budget. And, we're discussing a new agreement with Israel that would guide our military assistance until 2029. Even in these days of belt tightening, we are prepared to sign the single largest military assistance package—with any country—in American history. It would constitute a significant increase in support, and provide Israel the funding to update much of its fighter aircraft fleet, substantially enhance the mobility of its ground forces, and continue to strengthen its missile defense capabilities. That's what we mean when we say Israel is not alone.

This brings me to another critical piece of our support for Israel's long-term security—the Iran deal. We had a vigorous debate over this agreement. Nuclear physicists, military officials, experts, and over 100 countries ultimately supported it. Others, including many in Israel, opposed it. But, whether or not you supported this deal, the results are undeniable. Iran has dismantled two-thirds of its installed centrifuges. They've shipped 98 percent of their enriched uranium stockpile out of the country—enough for about 10 nuclear bombs. The Arak reactor core is now filled with concrete, never to be used again. Before this deal, Iran's breakout time to gain enough material to build a nuclear weapon was two or three months. Today, it would take about a year—and if they cheat, we'll know. With this deal, we've closed off every possible path to building a nuclear weapon—every single one—and subjected Iran to the most comprehensive nuclear inspections regime ever negotiated.

Yet, we're under no illusions. As we've said all along, our guiding principle is "distrust and verify." And, as the President has repeatedly emphasized, this deal was never intended to resolve all of our differences with Iran. That's why non-nuclear related sanctions on Iran remain in place. Hundreds of Iran-linked firms and individuals remain sanctioned on non-nuclear grounds. We have all the authorities we need to combat Iran's destabilizing activities—and we are. That includes new

sanctions designations that target Iran's ballistic missile program and support for terrorism. We will not let Iran off the hook.

Our commitment to Israel's security is also why we continue to urge Israelis and Palestinians to resolve what President Rivlin calls "the tragedy that envelops us all." As President Obama has said, peace is necessary, just, and possible. Indeed, the only path to sustainable security for Israel and to dignity and self-determination for the Palestinians is two states for two peoples, living side by side in peace and security. That is why, as we mark the 49th anniversary this week of the Six-Day War, we continue to strongly oppose Israeli settlement activity. Just like every administration since 1967, Republican and Democratic. Just as we oppose counterproductive Palestinian actions and strongly condemn incitement and violence. Settlement activity corrodes the prospects for two states. It moves us toward a one-state reality. Israel's future as a Jewish, democratic state is at stake.

Secretary Kerry has just returned from a gathering of foreign ministers in Paris, where the United States and all other participants underscored that a negotiated two-state solution is the only way to achieve an enduring peace. A solution cannot be imposed on the parties. But, we continue to urge them to undertake meaningful actions on the ground that are consistent with their rhetorical commitment to two states. Children in Sderot and Gaza, in Netanya and Jenin—children who are just like yours and mine—deserve a future that is not consumed by this conflict. As my cherished friend and Israel's national treasure, Shimon Peres, says, "There are two things in life you cannot achieve unless you close your eyes a little bit: love and peace."

So, we will continue, as the Psalm says, to "seek peace and pursue it." At the same time, we will stand up not just for Israel's security, but for Israel's very legitimacy. I want to be clear: no country is immune from criticism. No country should be immune from criticism. The United States certainly isn't. But, when one nation is targeted relentlessly, obsessively, bitterly—as Israel is—that's just wrong. It's ugly. It's bullying in the guise of diplomacy. It has to stop.

For four and a half years at the UN, I did battle every day to defend Israel from a drumbeat of hostility. I was proud to lead that fight. The United States fought tooth and nail against the deeply-flawed Goldstone Report. We vigorously opposed the Human Rights Council's unbalanced and counter-productive focus on Israel. When the Palestinians tried to short-circuit the path to

statehood, President Obama stood before the General Assembly and said, “Peace will not come through statements and resolutions at the United Nations... ultimately, it is the Israelis and the Palestinians who must live side by side.” And, when the Security Council pushed a divisive resolution targeting settlements—even as the United States was pursuing a more constructive path forward—at President Obama’s direction I raised my hand and cast the first and only veto of this Administration. My successor, Ambassador Power, continues to show that Israel has no better friend at the UN than the United States—including pushing to integrate Israel more fully into the international system.

Moreover, when Israel’s adversaries seek to isolate and boycott Israel economically, we forcefully combat these efforts. We strengthen our economic ties even more. The United States stands firmly against these attempts to delegitimize Israel.

And, when Iran holds an abhorrent Holocaust cartoon contest, when violence and vile words lead Jews to take down *mezuzahs* in Europe, when more than half of American Jewish college students say they’ve witnessed or experienced anti-Semitism on campus—we call out and confront that ancient hatred for what it is: an absolute outrage. As President Obama said earlier this year, when he became the first sitting United States president to speak at the Israeli Embassy, “An attack on any faith is an attack on all of our faiths... we are all Jews.” That’s why we applaud and work closely with groups like AJC—your “Mayors United Against Anti-Semitism” ad in today’s *Wall Street Journal* made a powerful statement against hate. That’s why, last year, the United States helped organize the first-ever UN General Assembly meeting on anti-Semitism. That’s why we’ve appointed a special envoy to monitor anti-Semitism, Ira Forman, and are urging other countries to appoint their own. We won’t let up. This ugly hatred has to end.

That’s our record. These are our principles. This is President Obama’s steadfast commitment.

For me, the warmth and strength of this relationship will always be rooted in my very first visit to Israel. I was 14 years old. My beloved late father was on the board of TWA—some of you will remember that once-great airline—and he took my younger brother and me to Israel. We arrived on one of the first-ever flights from Egypt to Israel, just after the Camp David Accords were signed. On that trip, we bowed our heads in sorrow at Yad Vashem. We walked the Old City, climbed Masada, floated in the Dead Sea, and picked fruit at a *kibbutz*. I learned by heart the words of the *sh’ma*. Like

so many Americans who have visited Israel, those memories are etched in my soul.

There is another, more recent, memory that I will never forget—a highlight of my time in this job. It took place a few years ago, when I had the chance to play basketball on the White House court with some young Israelis and Palestinians. They're a group called the PeacePlayers, and they use sports to bridge their communities. We were out on the South Lawn, not far from where Begin and Sadat made peace and where Rabin and Arafat shook hands. Everyone was wearing shorts and t-shirts—boys and girls, Israelis and Palestinians, observant and less observant. And, we played—Israelis and Palestinians on the same coed teams, sweating, bumping each other, going for the ball, hustling across the lines of the court as if they had never been divided by lines on a map. They were very good players, by the way. Much better than us—though that's not saying much. On that basketball court, I saw what was possible. I saw what the future might hold, if only we have the courage to reach for it.

I know these are difficult days. At times like these, it's easy to give in to doubt, and cynicism, and despair. It's easy to be overcome by fear—to turn inward and turn against one another. But, as those young people remind us—as the anthem we'll sing later reminds us—even in our darkest moments, there is hope. Hope for peace. Hope for progress. Hope for *tzedek*, for justice. No matter how distant these goals may seem, we can never forget the truth to Herzl's magnificent words: "If you will it, it is no dream." So, with God's blessing and God's help, let's keep willing it. Let's keep working for it. Let's keep mending our broken world—together. Thank you.

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