

Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at the Convention of the Zionist Organization of America, New York City, August 26, 1960

American Leadership for Peace in the Middle East

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President Abraham A. J. Redelheim, Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, Mayor Wagner, Ladies and gentlemen, I am honored by your generous invitation to speak here tonight. I had the opportunity 14 years ago as a newly elected Member of Congress to hear one of the greatest speeches I have ever heard in all of my life given on the cause which interests you so much tonight, in the city of Boston by your great guest here tonight, Rabbi Silver.

Prophecy is a Jewish tradition - and the world Zionist movement in which you have played such a great role has continued this long tradition. It has turned the dreams of its leaders into acts of statesmanship. It has converted the hopes of the Jewish people into the concrete facts of life.

When the first Zionist convention met in 1897, Palestine was a wasted, neglected land. A few scattered Jewish colonies had settled there. But they had come there to die, not to live. Most of the governments of the world were indifferent.

But all this now has changed. Israel has become a triumphant reality, exactly 50 years after Theodore Herzl, the prophet of Zionism proclaimed its inevitability. It was the classic case of an ancient dream finding a young leader, for Herzl was only 37 years of age.

Youth No Barrier

Perhaps I may be allowed that observation because the Jewish people ever since David slew Goliath have never considered youth as a barrier to leadership or measured maturity and experience by length of days.

I spent two weeks in Palestine in 1939. There the neglect and ruin left by centuries of the Ottoman Empire were slowly being transformed under conditions of the utmost difficulty by labor and sacrifice. But Palestine was still a land of promise in 1939 rather than a land of fulfillment.

I went back in 1951. In three years, this new state had opened up its doors to 600,000 people. The United States, composed of 175 million people, has an immigration of all we can take, we say, of 250,000 a year. Even while fighting for its own survival Israel has given hope to the persecuted all over the world and it has given a new dignity to those who believe in religious freedom in every part of this globe.

I left with a conviction that though the United Nations had given international status to Israel, nevertheless, Israel had been made a nation by its own exertions.

And it has claims to immortality. Some do not agree.

Attacked by Cairo Radio

Three weeks ago, I said in a public statement Israel is here to stay. The next day I was attacked by the Cairo radio rebuking me for my faith in Israel and quoting this criticism from Arabic newspaper Al-Gomhouria:

“As for the question of the existence and nonexistence of Israel,” the paper says, “Mr. Kennedy says that Israel has been created in order to exist. And we say that Israel will not continue to exist. Time will judge between us, Mr. Kennedy.”

I agree. Time will judge between us whether Israel will continue to exist or not.

But I wish I could be as sure of my prophecy about this November as I am about my prophecy on this occasion.

It is worth remembering at this meeting that the cause of Israel stands beyond Jewish life. In our pluralistic society, as Bob Wagner pointed out, it has not been merely a Jewish cause, any more than Irish independence was the cause merely of those of Irish descent, because wherever freedom exists, there we are all committed. And wherever it is endangered, there we are all endangered.

The ideals of Zionism have, in the last half century, been endorsed by both parties, and by Americans of all ranks in all sections. Friendship for Israel is not a partisan matter. It is a national commitment.

Yet within this national obligation of friendship, there is a special obligation on the party of which I am a member. It was President Woodrow Wilson who prophesied with great wisdom a Jewish homeland. It was President Franklin Roosevelt who kept alive the hope of Jewish redemption in the days of the Nazi terror. It was President Harry Truman who first – my friend Harry Truman – who first recognized (I have only been able to say that since last Saturday, but I’m saying it), who first recognized the status of Israel in world affairs.

And may I add that it would be my hope and pledge to continue this great Democratic

tradition, to be worthy of it, to be associated with it, for what is needed now is leadership – impartial but firm, deliberate but bold, leadership instead of rhetoric.

There has been enough rhetoric in recent years about free transit through the Suez Canal to float every boat through it, but there has been no leadership. Our policy in Washington and in the United Nations has permitted defiance of our 1956 pledge with impunity – indeed, with economic reward.

If America's word to the world is to have any meaning, if the decisions and resolutions of the United Nations are to be binding on all parties, if the Mutual Security Amendment, which I co-sponsored with Senator Paul H. Douglas, is to have meaning, if the clear, thoughtful language of the Democratic platform is to have meaning – the influence of this Nation and other maritime powers must be brought to bear on a just solution that removes all discrimination from the Suez Canal.

A Moral Obligation

The Israelis surrendered their 1956 victory only because the United States and the United Nations committed themselves to the fulfillment of a pledge of free transit in the Suez Canal. So this is a United Nations resolution, in which we have a particular moral obligation.

We have also had much rhetoric in recent years about the arms race in the Middle East. This rhetoric has not only been empty and negative; even more fundamental is the premise that if the United States and the United Nations are to reject a solution based on force then they must accept the task of finding a solution based on reason and justice.

When I talked with Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion on his recent visit in the United States, he told me of dangerous signs of unrest, which existed then under the seeming quiet of the Middle East. For there is no peace in that region today, only an embittered truce between renewed alarms.

American intervention, on the other hand, will not now be easy, for the record is not one to which we can point with pride. The series of incredible American blunders which led to the 1956 Suez crisis, events in which the role of our Government has never been fully explained; the so-called Eisenhower doctrine which had been repudiated by the very nations which accepted our aid, and, in general, a deterioration in our relations with all Middle Eastern countries primarily because neither Arab nor Israeli know exactly where we stand or exactly what we mean.

Punishment for Virtues

At times it must have appeared that champions of democracy were being punished for their very virtues by being taken for granted, by a neglectful administration which showed concern only when it was displeased by their conduct.

Peace in the Middle East is not one step nearer reality than it was eight years ago, and the Russian influence has increased immeasurably.

What can a new President do? Moral weakness and timidity will not do. More stubborn errors, redeemed at the last minute, will not do. Now we must take the risk of leadership and use our influence to compose this ugly situation before it breaks out in a new threat to peace.

And I know we will not be alone in searching for a peaceful solution if our aims are high, and if they are centered solely on the genuine needs of the people of the Middle East, and on an honorable end to an ancient quarrel.

First, I propose that the new President reaffirm our sincere friendship for all people in the Middle East, whatever their religion or their race or their politics.

Secondly, I propose that we make it crystal clear that the United States meant what it said in the tripartite declaration of 1950 that we will act promptly and decisively against any nation in the Middle East which attacks its neighbor.

Make Intentions Clear

I propose that we make clear to both the Israelis and the Arabs our guarantee that we will act with whatever force and speed is necessary to halt any aggression by any nation.

I propose that an international effort be made to limit an arms race in the Middle East with a realization-with a realization that if this is not accomplished we shall not permit an imbalance to exist which threatens the right of any country to self-defense.

Once the nations of the Middle East have a firm and precise guarantee, then the need for continuing an arms race can disappear, the easing of tension can follow, and both sides will be able to devote their energy to peaceful pursuits.

Third, I propose that all the authority of the White House be used to call into conference the leaders of Israel and the Arab States to consider privately their common problems, assuring that we support in full their aspirations for peace, unity, Independence, and a better life; and that we are prepared to back up this moral commitment with economic and technical assistance.

The offer should be made with equal frankness to both sides and all the world would be watching the response of each side.

I sincerely believe that an American Presidential Initiative, honestly intended and resolutely pursued, would not be lightly rejected by either side, unless that side was prepared to bear the burden of breaking the peace.

And I promise to waste no time in taking that initiative. The Middle East needs water, not war. They need tractors, not tanks, and they need bread, not bombs.

There is already little enough in that sandy soil to be wasted on a dizzy arms race on both sides, an arms race which could be prevented if guarantees of security were provided. For the original Zionist philosophy always maintained that the people of Israel would use their national genius not for selfish purposes, but for the enrichment of the Middle East.

The earliest Zionist leaders spoke of a Jewish state which would have no military power and which would be content with victories of the spirit. The compulsions of a harsh and inescapable necessity have compelled Israel to abandon this hope. But I cannot believe that anyone in Israel tonight wants to live their lives out in a garrison state. And I cannot believe that the Arab world would not find a better basis for unity in a united attack against all of their accumulated social problems - an attack in which they could benefit immensely from a closer association with the people of Israel.

The people of Israel have brought their blessings to people all over the world, to Burma and Ghana and Ethiopia. Why should the countries of the Middle East, which need technical assistance, why should they be denied this opportunity to participate in a great source of future wealth for them and their people?

It is a long and painful step, may I say, from the era of the boycott to the era of peaceful partnership. And that step needs the direct encouragement and help of the people of the United States and the President of the United States. The next President of the United States, whoever he may be, should always be available first to stimulate every experiment in cooperation, from the joint development of a river to a reconsideration of the Arab refugee problem, suggested I think best by the Democratic platform, to the crowning mercy of a final reconciliation that can be brought about by a true peace settlement.

Peace is our objective in the Middle East and peace is the objective of Israel, and peace is our responsibility in part. "Seek peace and pursue it," says the Psalmist. And that we must do - open up our minds and our hearts and we shall seek peace for ourselves and all who share our aspirations. And when history writes its verdict, let it say that we pursued peace with all of our courage, that we did everything that we could do with our hands to make sure that the blessing was brought to our children and all those who think as we do.

We are in this country the youngest of people. But we are the oldest of republics. Now is our chance in this country to extend the hand of friendship to the oldest of People and the youngest of republics.

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