

Bernie Sanders' Speech on Israel, Trump and anti-Semitism at J Street Conference 2017

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Thank you for inviting me to address you here today. It's a pleasure to be here with J Street, which has been such a strong voice for saner, more progressive foreign policy ideas. And I am delighted to be in the company of friends from the Middle East and all over the world who I know will continue the struggle for a world of peace, justice and environmental sanity.

Let me begin by noting that in the last several months, since Donald Trump's victory in the presidential race, there has been a significant outbreak of anti-Semitism here in our country. I am very alarmed by the desecration of Jewish cemeteries, with Jewish Community Centers being threatened around the country, and with the headquarters of the Anti-Defamation League receiving a bomb threat last week.

When we see violent and verbal racist attacks against minorities – whether they are African-Americans, Jews, Muslims in this country, immigrants in this country, or the LGBT community, these attacks must be condemned at the highest levels of our government.

It was rather extraordinary that in the White House's Holocaust Remembrance Day statement, the murder of 6 million Jews was not mentioned by the Trump administration. I hope very much that Pres. Trump and his political advisor Mr. Bannon understand that the world is watching: it is imperative that their voices be loud and clear in condemning anti-Semitism, violent attacks against immigrants in this country, including the murder of two young men from India, and all forms of bigotry here and around the world. This country has struggled too long against racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia. We will not go back. We are going to go forward and fight discrimination of all forms.

I must say that I also found it very troubling that, at a recent press conference, when President Trump was given an opportunity to condemn the bigotry and anti-Semitism that has arisen in the wake of his election, he chose to respond by bragging - incorrectly, by the way - about the size of his Electoral College victory. Our society is still riven by tensions from the campaign, and Americans need a president who will try to bring us together, rather than boast about his political victory.

Let me take this opportunity to thank J Street for the bold voice that they've provided in support of American leadership in the Middle East and efforts towards peace between Israelis and Palestinians. I understand that, given the political climate in this capital, that has not always been easy. I also applaud them for being part of a broad coalition of groups that successfully fought for the historic nuclear agreement between the U.S. and its partners and Iran.

That agreement demonstrated that real American leadership, real American power, is not shown by our ability to blow things up, but by our ability to bring parties together, to forge international consensus around shared problems, and then to mobilize that consensus to address those problems.

For many years, leaders across the world, especially Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, had sounded the alarm about the possibility of an Iranian nuclear weapon. What the Obama administration was able to do, with the support of groups like J Street and others, was to get an agreement that froze and dismantled large parts of that nuclear program, put it under the most intensive inspections regime in history, and removed the prospect of an Iranian nuclear weapon from the list of global threats.

As a member of the United States Senate, I hear a whole lot of speechifying. I hear from many of my colleagues how "tough" the United States has got to be, and how, at the end of the day, military force is what matters.

Well, I say to those colleagues, 'It's easy to give speeches in the safety of the floor of the Senate or the House. It's a little bit harder to experience war and live through the devastation of war. I recall vividly all of the rhetoric that came from the Bush administration, that came from my Republican colleagues, and some Democrats, about why going to war in Iraq was the right thing to do. Well, it wasn't. In fact, it is one of the great tragedies of modern world history.

Today it is now broadly acknowledged that the war in Iraq, which I opposed, was a foreign policy blunder of enormous magnitude. The war in Iraq led to the deaths of some 4,400 U.S. troops and the wounding, physical and emotional, of tens of thousands of others—not to mention the pain inflicted on wives and children and parents. The war in Iraq led to, conservatively speaking, the deaths of over 100,000 Iraqi civilians and the wounding and displacement of many more. It created a cascade of instability around the region that we are still dealing with today in Syria and elsewhere, and will be for many years to come. And, by the way, that war in Iraq cost trillions of dollars—money that should have been spent on health care, education, infrastructure, and environmental protection.

The Iraq war, like many other military conflicts, had unintended consequences. It ended up making us less safe, not more safe.

In contrast, the Iran nuclear deal helped the security of the U.S. and its partners – yes, it helped the security of Israel, as many Israeli security experts have acknowledged – and it did this at a tiny fraction of the cost in blood and treasure of the Iraq war. This is the power of diplomacy. This is real leadership.

Some who opposed this nuclear deal have attacked its supporters, including J Street, for being part of a so-called “echo chamber.” The truth is that Washington has for many years had a very loud and powerful echo chamber for war. It’s about time we had an echo chamber for peace. So thank you J Street.

Now, as many of you know, I have a connection to the State of Israel going back many years. In 1963, I lived on a kibbutz near Haifa. It was there that I saw and experienced for myself many of the progressive values upon which the State of Israel was founded. I think it is very important for everyone, but particularly for progressives, to acknowledge the enormous achievement of establishing a democratic homeland for the Jewish people after centuries of displacement and persecution, and particularly after the horror of the Holocaust.

But as you all know, there was another side to the story of Israel’s creation, a more painful side. Like our own country, the founding of Israel involved the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people already living there, the Palestinian people. Over 700,000 people were made refugees.

To acknowledge this painful historical fact does not “delegitimize” Israel, any more than acknowledging the Trail of Tears delegitimizes the United States of America.

But I didn’t come here today simply to revisit history, or to say one historical narrative is wrong and one is right. My question here today is: OK, what now? Where do Israelis and Palestinians go from here? What should be U.S. policy to end this conflict, to end this fifty-year long occupation, and enable a better, more secure and prosperous future for Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians alike?

This decades-long conflict has taken so much from so many. Nobody gains when Israel spends an enormous part of its budget on the military. Nobody gains when Gaza is obliterated and thousands are killed, wounded, or made homeless. Nobody gains when children are trained to be suicide bombers. Nobody gains when year after year, decade after decade, the talk is about war and hatred rather than peace and development. Think of the incredible potential that is being lost when Israelis and Palestinians are not coming together effectively to address the environmental and economic challenges of the region. Our vision, a vision we must never lose sight of, is creating a Middle East where people come together in peace and democracy to create a region in which all people have a decent life. I understand that, given the realities of today, that vision appears distant and maybe even far-fetched. But it is a vision and a dream that we cannot afford to give up on.

So what should we as progressives – American progressives, Israeli progressives and progressives globally -- demand of our governments in bringing this future about?

Let’s take a moment to talk about values.

It’s often said that the U.S.-Israel relationship is based on “shared values.” I think this is correct, but then we also have to ask: What do we mean by this? What values are we talking about?

As progressives, here are the values we share: We believe in democracy. We believe in equality. We believe in pluralism. We are strongly opposed to xenophobia. We respect and we will protect the rights of minorities.

These are values that are shared by progressives in this country and across the globe. These values are based upon the very simple notion that we share a common humanity. Whether we are Israelis or Palestinians or Americans, whether we are Jews, Christians, Muslims, or of another religion, we all want our children to grow up healthy, to have a good education, have decent jobs, drink clean water and breathe clean air, and to live in peace.

That's what being human is about. And our job is to do everything that we can to oppose all of the political forces, no matter what side they may be on, who try to tear us apart.

Earlier this month, at a White House press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, President Trump was asked whether he supported a two-state solution. His answer was, "I'm looking at two-state and one-state, and I like the one that both parties like." As if someone asked him whether he preferred Coke to Pepsi.

We should be clear: The two-state solution, which involves the establishment of a Palestinian state in the territories occupied in 1967, has been bipartisan U.S. policy for many years. It is also supported by an overwhelming international consensus, which was reaffirmed in December by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334. While I understand that they've walked that statement back, the casual manner in which President Trump appeared to abandon that policy was extremely concerning, but also unfortunately typical of the carelessness with which he has managed American foreign policy thus far.

The president said that he supports a peace deal, but this doesn't mean much. The real question is: Peace on what terms, and under what arrangement? Does "peace" mean that Palestinians will be forced to live under perpetual Israeli rule, in a series of disconnected communities in the West Bank and Gaza? That's not tolerable, and that's not peace.

If Palestinians in the occupied territories are to be denied self-determination in a state of their own, will they receive full citizenship and equal rights in a single state, potentially meaning the end of a Jewish majority state? These are very serious questions with significant implications for America's broader regional partnerships and goals.

Friends, the United States and the State of Israel have a strong bond, going back to the moment of Israel's founding. There is no question that we should be, and will be Israel's strong friend and ally in the years to come. At the same time, we must recognize that Israel's continued occupation of Palestinian territories and its daily restrictions on the political and civil liberties of the Palestinian people runs contrary to fundamental American values.

As former Secretary of State John Kerry rightly said in his speech in December, 'Friends need to tell each other the hard truths.' And the hard truth is that the continued occupation and the growth of Israeli settlements that the occupation sustains, undermines the possibility of peace. It contributes to suffering and violence.

As the United Nations Security Council reaffirmed on December 23, the settlements also constitute a flagrant violation of international law. I applaud the Obama administration's decision to abstain from vetoing UN Security Council Resolution 2334. Those of us who really support Israel have got to tell the truth about policies are hurting chances of reaching a peaceful resolution.

I recognize that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most emotionally fraught issues in U.S. politics, involving as it does the legitimate historical claims, identities and security of two peoples in the same region.

So let me be very clear: to oppose the policies of a right-wing government in Israel does not make one anti-Israel or an anti-Semite. We can oppose the policies of President Trump without being anti-American. We can oppose the policies of Netanyahu without being anti-Israel. We can oppose the policies of Islamic extremism without being anti-Muslim.

As I said during my presidential campaign, peace means security not only for every Israeli, but also for every Palestinian. It means supporting self-determination, civil rights, and economic well-being for both peoples. These ideas are based in the very same shared values that impel us to condemn anti-Semitic bigotry, condemn anti-Muslim bigotry, and to make our own society better. These are the ideas that should guide us. The values of inclusiveness, security, democracy, and justice should inform not only

America's engagement with Israel and Palestine, but with the region and the world.

The United States will continue its unwavering commitment to the safety of the State of Israel, but we must also be clear that peacefully resolving this conflict is the best way to ensure the long-term safety of both peoples, and for making America more secure.

To my Israeli friends here with us today: we share many of the same challenges. In both our countries we see the rise of a politics of bigotry and intolerance and resentment. We must meet these challenges together. As you struggle to make your society better, more just, more egalitarian, I want to say to you: Your fight is our fight.