Remarks by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (as prepared)  
Tuesday, March 3, 2020

Thank you very much.

For starters, I need to thank the leaders here today who work constantly so that our nation continues to stand with our friends — today, tomorrow, and together.


And all of you, who witness to the world-changing friendship between the United States and Israel.

In many ways, this year’s conference marks a promising time for the U.S.-Israel relationship.

The Trump administration has reaffirmed the importance of this friendship. We’ve moved our embassy to Jerusalem. We’ve recognized the Golan Heights. We’ve made it clear we have Israel’s back.

More broadly, the United States is rebuilding our armed forces, so friends and adversaries alike will not doubt our capabilities.

And we’ve taken shared enemies like Iran’s master terrorist Qassem Soleimani off the battlefield.

So we in the pro-Israel community have much to celebrate.
But we must also be honest and clear-eyed about challenges.

And that includes a dangerous shift in our politics here at home.

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For most of my career as a mainstream Republican internationalist, my foreign policy views fell within a bipartisan consensus.

For more than a generation, we trusted that certain big-picture goals were widely shared within both parties.

Like standing with Israel… Projecting power in the Middle East… Standing up for democratic values before crises arrive on our shores.

These basic pillars have paid dividends for our allies around the world.

Look at the modern state of Israel.

In 1948, the Middle East was much more distant from us than it is today. But because Americans understood the world did not end at our shores, we partnered with Israel and stood by her people as they built a democracy.

In fact, they’ve built such an energetic democracy that they’ve just had their third election in the last year!

But our consensus was not just good for friends like Israel. It’s been good for America.
Our internationalist approach and the post-World War II order it built have benefited this nation immeasurably. Victory in the Cold War. Unprecedented global peace and prosperity.

Sure, Americans had intense debates on specific foreign policies. But it was conflict within broad consensus.

We mostly were not arguing about whether to stand with Israel... whether to stay engaged in the Middle East... whether to maintain a physical footprint in the reason...

But rather, about how.

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Today, I’m afraid, this consensus is eroding.

Some loud voices have stopped asking how best to do these things, and have started asking whether we should do them at all.

Should we really stay engaged beyond our shores?

Should we really stand with Israel?

Should we have any military footprint in the Middle East?

The basic premises behind our success are now up for debate.
This is not confined to one side or the other. Some Republicans in Congress, in my view, sometimes vote in ways that would advance retrenchment and isolationism, particularly regarding the Middle East.

I have spoken out publicly within my own party, including on the idea of an abrupt withdrawal from Syria, which the President wisely reconsidered.

So I do not mean this as a partisan jab. But we must recognize these tendencies are not affecting both parties equally.

We cannot ignore that in today’s Democratic Party, what were once easy questions have become divisive flash points.

Standing with Israel, defending our presence in the Middle East — these things were once givens. Now they are controversial. They yield heated debate or heavy caveats.

Over a year ago, I wrote an amendment to put the Senate on the record.

I meant it to be a bipartisan reaffirmation of an active American role in the Middle East and a warning against reckless withdrawal.

Twenty-two of my Democratic colleagues voted against it, including the Democratic Leader Senator Schumer and 6 of the 7 who went on to run for president.

Consider this very conference. Who shows up?

Who literally stands with you?
In 2008, candidate Barack Obama made sure to attend. He called you, quote, “friends who share [a] strong commitment to make sure that the bond between the United States and Israel is unbreakable.”

In 2016, Secretary Hillary Clinton would not have missed this conference. She called the U.S.-Israel alliance, quote, “more indispensable than ever.”

Look how things change.

This year few leading Democratic presidential candidates even made the effort to show up.

I know the former Vice President addressed you by video, though not in person.

And he felt compelled to justify his participation by telling one activist he was speaking to you in order to try to change your views.

Others, including the senior Senator from Massachusetts, have made a public point of avoiding this gathering altogether.

Then there is the senior senator from Vermont. The current front-runner.

Not only did Senator Sanders skip this conference, he bashed it publicly.

He said you all provide a platform for bigotry. And he called Israel’s democratically-elected Prime Minister a “reactionary racist.”
Democratic candidates used to be proud to stand alongside Israel and AIPAC.

Now some jockey to see who can get the farthest away.

I’ve worked with Israeli governments of any party during my career. Whether I agreed with their every move or not. I’m going to keep doing that, whether they are left, or right, or both.

I’ve also worked my whole career to stand against anti-Semitism. We must denounce it wherever it emerges.

From the “alt-right” to the far left. In Europe or the Middle East or here at home.

I’ve called it out whenever I see it, including on my side of the aisle.

But this time last year, the House Democratic leadership had difficulty doing even that. Even when the shadow of anti-Semitic comments appeared within their own ranks, a quick and clear denunciation proved impossible.

For more than a year, the House has slow-walked legislation to oppose the BDS movement.

Apparently rejecting an anti-Semitic boycott that compares Israel to apartheid South Africa is now controversial.
And just yesterday, a sitting Democratic Congresswoman libelously stated that “AIPAC’s agenda” is to “dehumanize Palestinians, imprison Palestinian children, and promote Islamophobia.”

This needs to stop.

The American people deserve a debate about how we stand with Israel. About how we lead in the world. Not whether we do so at all.

The recent election in the United Kingdom showed us how quickly the far left’s flirtation with anti-Israel and anti-Semitic views can migrate from the fringe to the front-burner.

I hope we are not living through the “Corbyn-ization” of one of our major political parties in the United States.

I hope we can restore the bipartisan consensus that has served our nation, Israel, and the world so well.

But it appears we will need to fight for it.

Every American who is a friend of Israel has an obligation to police our own side.

We have an obligation to stamp out the first embers of anti-Semitism and to fight for the policy consensus we support.

Let’s face it: Democratic leaders may not often turn to me for advice.
But we both know they turn to you.

So I want to thank you. For your work. For your conviction.

You are why I remain hopeful and optimistic about the future of this vital relationship.

And thank you in advance for reminding the leaders who want your support —

That without American leadership, the world is more dangerous…

Without American influence, the Middle East is more troubled…

And our nation’s friendship with Israel is not negotiable.

Thank you very much.

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