

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2021

Remarks Prior to a Meeting With Prime Minister Naftali Bennett of Israel

August 27, 2021

President Biden. Welcome, folks. It's a delight to have the Prime Minister here. I know there's going to be—we're going to talk about our relationship, which is as strong as can be. But I know you're going to want to know what's happened this morning in terms of my meetings with our—my national security team.

Terrorist Attack at the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, on August 26

Let me begin by once again acknowledging the bravery and the sacrifice that our military makes every single day. And the loss of those Americans and marines and sailor and Army personnel is tragic.

As I said yesterday, and the Prime Minister and I talked about it slightly—he's a military man; gone to war, lost a friend—you know, losing a son, a daughter, a husband, a wife, is like being sucked into a big black hole in the middle of your chest, and you don't think there's any way out—you wonder what's happening. So my heart goes out—our hearts go out—to all those who we've lost.

But look, the mission there being performed is dangerous, and it is now—it's come with a significant loss of American personnel. And—but it's a worthy mission because they continue to evacuate folks out of that region, out of the airport. We've evacuated more than 12,000 additional people out of the airport in the last 24 hours.

I met with my commanders this morning, first thing in the morning. I got a detailed briefing about yesterday's attacks and the measures they're taking to protect our forces and complete the mission. And we will complete the mission.

Now, I'm not going to take any questions, because of the Prime Minister being here, on Afghanistan now, but I'll be available at another time.

The President's Meeting With Prime Minister Naftali Bennett of Israel

But it's great to have the Prime Minister here. We—he—we've become close friends. He's ridden the Amtrak train a lot—[laughter]—from New York down to Wilmington, Delaware—I told you we have a few corporations in Delaware—back in the days when he was in private practice.

And—but he heads and leads the most diverse government in Israeli history. And we've got a big agenda today, starting with COVID—which we've been talking about—and—19—and both our successful vaccination programs.

And we've talked a little bit—and we're going to continue to talk—about the issue of booster shots. And they—you started your program a little early. It's been met with great results. And we're going to start mid-September, but we're considering the advice you've given that we should start earlier.

And this is promising also—this booster program is going to start here on September the 20th, pending approval of the FDA and then a CDC committee of outside experts. And the question raised is: Should it be shorter than 8 months? Should it be as little as 5 months? And that's being discussed. I spoke with Dr. Fauci this morning about that.

We're also going to discuss Israel's unwavering—unwavering commitment that we have in the United States to Israel's security. And I fully, fully, fully support replenishing Israel's Iron Dome system.

And we also are going to discuss the threat from Iran and our commitment to ensure Iran never develops a nuclear weapon. And—but we're putting diplomacy first and seeing where that takes us.

But if diplomacy fails, we're ready to turn to other options. We'll support Israel's developing deeper ties, as well, with the Arab and Muslim neighbors and globally. That's a trend that I think should be encouraged and not discouraged. And we're going to do all we can to be value added.

We also are going to discuss ways to advance peace and security and prosperity for Israelis and Palestinians. And we're also going to direct our teams to work toward Israel fulfilling the requirements of the visa waiver program and get that done.

So, Mr. Prime Minister, I want to thank you again for coming. The U.S. will always be there for Israel. It's an unshakeable partnership between our two nations. And I've known every Israeli Prime Minister since Golda Meir and gotten to know them fairly well. And I look forward to us establishing a strong, personal relationship.

So, welcome. Welcome.

Prime Minister Bennett. Thank you, Mr. President. First of all, on behalf of the Israeli people, I want to extend our condolences and deep sadness for the loss of American lives in Kabul. The American servicemembers lost their lives while on a mission to save other people's lives, and that's the very definition of courage and sacrifice. May they rest in peace. Especially on this day, I want to be crystal clear: Israel always stands together with the United States of America unequivocally.

I also want to thank you for your warm words now and in our private meeting, which attests to your support of the State of Israel. But that's not new; it's been decades. And you've always stood up for us, especially during tough times, like a few months ago when thousands of rockets were being shot on Israeli towns and cities. And that's when friendship is really tested. We trust in your support, Mr. President. And Israel knows that we have no better or more reliable ally in the world than the United States of America.

I come here from Jerusalem, our eternal capital. And I bring with me a new spirit, a spirit of good will, a spirit of hope, a spirit of decency and honesty, a spirit of unity and bipartisanship of folks who, as you suggested, harbor very different political opinions, even opposing. Yet we all share the deep passion to work together to build a better future for Israel. And that's what Israel is about.

We're out to be good, to do good. But in our region, doing good is not enough. Israel has to be strong in order to do good. Be strong so we can do good.

And we cannot lose sight for even one moment that we're in the toughest neighborhood in the world. We've got ISIS on our southern border, Hizballah on our northern border, Islamic Jihad, Hamas, Iranian militias that surround us. And all of them want to kill—kill us, kill Israelis. They all want to annihilate the Jewish state. And that's why Israel always has to be overwhelming strong—overwhelmingly stronger than any of our enemies and, indeed, of all our enemies combined.

And that's why I want to thank you, Mr. President, for helping, yet again, to fortify Israel's strategic advantage.

Obviously, the main issue we're going to be talking about today here is Iran's race to a nuclear weapon. We talked about it inside the room, and I was happy to hear your clear words that Iran will never be able to acquire a nuclear weapon and that you emphasized that you'll try the diplomatic route, but there's other options if that doesn't work out.

So, you know, these very days illustrate what the world would look like. If a radical Islamic regime acquired a nuclear weapon, that marriage would be a nuclear nightmare for the entire world. Iran is the world's number-one exporter of terror, instability, and human right violations. And as we sit here right now, the Iranians are spinning their centrifuges in Natanz and Fordow, but we've got to stop it. And we both agree.

So we've developed a comprehensive strategy that we're going to be talking about with two goals: The first goal is to stop Iran on its regional aggression and start rolling it back into the box; and the second is to permanently keep Iran away from ever being able to break out to a nuclear weapon.

As I told you, Mr. President, Israel never had and never will ask America to send troops to defend ourselves. That's our job. We will never outsource our security. It's our responsibility to take care of our fate. But we do thank you for the tools and the back you've been giving us and you're giving us.

As you said, we're also going to be talking about COVID and the Delta variant, which is wreaking havoc across the world. You were the first to call the pandemic "the pandemic of the unvaccinated," and that is—could not be more true.

Just about a month ago, I took a very tough decision, a policy decision, that Israel would pioneer the booster shot, the third shot. I can report to you, Mr. President, and to everyone, that we've reached almost 3 million Israelis that have received the booster shot. And the bottom line is, it's safe, and it works. The good news, finally, is that the tide is turning in Israel.

And one last word, Mr. President—I'll take this off for this part, if I may: You're a man of faith, as am I. In the synagogues across the world, we read a biblical portion; beyond the Parsha, it's called the Haftarah. And tomorrow we're going to be reading words of the prophet Isaiah—Yesha'yahu. In Hebrew, the words are——

[At this point, Prime Minister Bennett spoke in Hebrew. He then resumed his remarks in English as follows.]

What this means—I can say anything now. Right? *[Laughter]* What this means is, the sons and daughters of the Jewish people are going to come back to our land, are going to nurse our ancient land and rebuild it. And this ancient Jewish prophecy is today's Israel reality. And I—it's a miracle that you've been so central and so part of it for so many years.

So, Mr. President, today, you and I—and you've been so generous with your time in these difficult days—you and I are going to write yet another chapter in the beautiful story of the friendship between our two nations, the United States of America and the Jewish and democratic State of Israel, both of us who seek to do good and need to be strong, both of us who are a lighthouse in a very, very stormy world.

Thank you, Mr. President. I look forward to working with you now and for many years forward. Thank you.

President Biden. Well, thank you. And you give me credit, much of which should go to Barack Obama, for making sure that we committed to a qualitative edge you would have relative to your friends in the region. So he's the one that deserves the credit.

Prime Minister Bennett. Thank him as well.

President Biden. Thank you very much, folks.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony S. Fauci; and former President Barack Obama. Prime Minister Bennett referred to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist organization.

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