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## AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee)

Max S. Baucus

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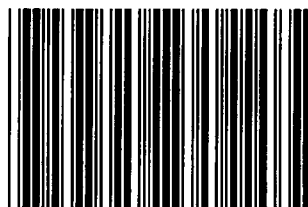
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**BAUCUS**



Today I find myself in the challenging position of trying to come up with something original and compelling to tell you about the status of the Middle East Peace Process.

Despite the recent breakdown in talks between President Clinton and Syrian President Hafez Assad in Geneva last month, I remain ~~very~~ optimistic that there is a great opportunity to move the Israeli-Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese negotiations in a direction that can lead to a comprehensive peace between Israel and all of its Arab neighbors this year.

Indeed, working towards a comprehensive peace has been one of the top priorities of this administration. It is

● an area where I think a lot of progress has been made especially during this second Clinton administration.

This year still has the makings to be a decisive one in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Unquestionably there

✓ are a number of serious challenges. But challenges present opportunities and I think we have a genuine

● chance to take an historic step towards ending the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Much depends on the immediate future, but my optimism for a lasting peace for Israel is rooted in the events of the past.

● A little over 5 years ago the Arab-Israeli peace process

was locked in what some have called the "Time of Crisis." It lasted through 1999.

During this period, the Clinton administration saw some serious setbacks in the process of Arab- Israeli

peacemaking. All of you probably remember some of

the more sad and tragic events; not only Prime Minister

Rabin's assassination in 1995, but the wave of

terrorism and suicide bombings by Hamas and the

Palestinian Islamic Jihad in late February and early

March '96, when four bombs exploded in nine days.

At the same time, a government was elected in Israel

that made clear it opposed the Oslo Peace process and

had a different conception of Arab-Israeli peacemaking.

This created real doubts and real uncertainty about a process that had paid real dividends in the four years before.

By the fall of 1996, the United States faced a fundamental crisis of confidence between Israelis and Palestinians. This had a chilling effect on the whole region.

And the situation rapidly moved from bad to worse.

Regional contacts and multilateral negotiations were frozen. The very foundation of the Oslo Peace Accords negotiated only three years earlier, the idea that negotiations could solve problems, was at risk.

Suspicion replaced trust, fear supplanted hope, and competition overshadowed cooperation.

The next two years, from the fall of 1996 to the fall of 1998, were the toughest years the United States faced since negotiations began at the Madrid Peace

Conference many years before. But despite these difficulties, our resolve remained.

The United States remained guided by the essential fact about our objective and commitment to restoring peace in the Middle East – whatever the differences, however great the mistrust, between Prime Minister Netanyahu and Chairman Arafat neither could not afford a collapse of the peace process.



Without trust between the leaders, the process would have no future. But unless the United States acted, the entire structure of peace could have collapsed.

At the request of both parties, the United States became involved in all levels of negotiations between Prime Minister Netanyahu and Chairman Arafat from the highest to the lowest levels.

During those years, there were two agreements reached, the Hebron protocol in January 1997 and the Wye River memorandum in October 1998. Neither was fully implemented, but both accords, were critical achievements that I believe will leave a legacy on which others would soon build.

Thankfully -- these years of crisis -- have now led to a period of opportunity.

The election of Prime Minister Barak last summer offered the Arab-Israeli peace process new life and new hope.

Within the past eight months, despite the ups and downs that we've seen, the process seems to have gotten solidly back on track.

Yes, there are still many conflicts that need to be resolved. But those who hope to play a role in resolving them need to understand the complexities

inherent in the region, look past their resentment, their

anger and their past grievance and look toward ways to solve problems in a way that produces a win for both sides.

A wise individual once said that there has never been an agreement that lasted in which one side won and the other side lost.

Looking for a win-win outcome is the only solution for a successful agreement.

But think for a moment of the positive results that now lie before us if differences, which have plagued this region, could be settled this year.

We know that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is at the core of the Middle East problem. And if we could resolve this core issue, once and for all, it would make a profound difference in the lives of not only the Palestinians and the Israelis but Israel's entire role in the region.

With regard to the situation between Israel and Syria and Lebanon.

This summer, Israel is committed to withdraw from Lebanon. Well, how much better, how much safer, how much more secure would that withdrawal be if it came as a result of arrangements that ensure that Syria and Lebanon would no longer threaten the security of

● Israel's northern border?

And think of the psychological and political consequences of Syria, the last Arab holdout -- the country that has historically resisted all previous attempt to negotiate -- think if Syria were to normalize relations with Israel and close the circle of peace of all the countries around Israel.

● And think of how isolated that would make the determined enemies of peace.

● Not only would they not have Syria as a base of operations to act within the borders of Israel -- or near Israel -- but the political and psychological effect on the

opponents of peace -- the terrorist organizations backed by Iran in many cases -- would no longer have the physical and political and psychological support of Syria and Lebanon. And that would be truly profound for Israel's place in the Middle East.

And remember what we're talking about here.

We're talking about trying to prevent and stop a potential war between Israel and Syria that could be truly, truly dangerous and carry with it great risks of escalation. Syria has weaponry and power far beyond anything that Israel has faced in its conflict with the Palestinians over recent years.

So those are the potential opportunities we have right now.

Much will depend on the courage, the political will and statesmanship of four leaders – President Bill Clinton, Prime Minister Ehud Barak, President Hafez Assad and Chairman Yasser Arafat.

But I am certain that if the resolve of the past is married to the optimism of what the future can bring, there is indeed hope that we will enable the children of the Middle East, the Arabs and the Israelis alike, to grow up free from the threat of terror and war, and in a secure climate of true and lasting peace.

● Thank you for your time.

