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## A New Image of Palestine in Washington

Media Mention of ATFP in Al-Raya - October 20, 2009 - 12:00am

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by Khairallah Khairallah (a translation from Arabic, see below for Arabic version)

Thank God for the new face of Palestine in Washington, an image that the United States of America can respect along with the rest of the international community. This Palestinian image, which has the potential to permeate the American consciousness, operates under the rubric of an organization called the American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP). A few days ago, on the evening of Oct. 15, the Task Force, which is headed by Dr. Ziad Asali, held its annual dinner in one of the premier hotels of the American capital.

The event was noteworthy in several respects. First was the presence of Retired General Jim Jones, Barack Obama's National Security Advisor, and his announcement during his keynote speech that he was officially representing President Obama. This bespeaks the importance that the American President places on the Palestinian issue on the one hand, and the extent to which he is willing to go in his efforts towards finding a solution on the other.

Recently there has been a lot of speculation about the position of the Obama administration on the settlement issue. However, Gen. Jones -- who is knowledgeable about the intricacies of the West Bank, as well as the nature of conflict in general and of the Palestinians and Israelis in particular -- spoke of "ending the occupation that started in 1967." One cannot fail to note the significance of this language, especially given that Jones emphasized that he came to the dinner as a representative of Obama and not just as in his capacity as the National Security Advisor.

His remarks made it clear that there is an administration policy that envisages the borders of the Palestinian state as being based on the lines of 1967 prior to the Israeli occupation. This strongly implies that the borders of Palestine will not be defined by the settlements. Benjamin Netanyahu, who does not want to hear about Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, would like to see borders defined by settlements and strives to impose Israeli conditions that would prevent effective Palestinian representation in any future talks.

In contrast to this Israeli position, Jones insisted that there is an occupation taking place in the West Bank, and that the solution is to have two states in historical Palestine. Herein lies the importance of ATFP's approach, which promotes the Palestinian issue by working within the American system. This is an effective strategy in an environment that traditionally provides Israel with maximum support by all means and at all levels.

It was no accident that the theme of the annual ATFP gala this year was "Palestine Alongside Israel: Liberty, Security and Prosperity." The tone was not a confrontation with the US government or policy, but instead an affirmation of the need to end the occupation under which Palestinians suffer. President Obama acknowledged the reality of the "occupation" and the need to end it through his advisor. The problem, as they outline it, is the occupation and how to end it.

The Palestinians will not free themselves from occupation without concerted efforts both on the ground in Palestine and in Washington. These efforts should ensure security in Palestine so that Israeli withdrawal will not lead to the formation of a Palestinian base for Al Qaeda or a Taliban-style emirate as is emerging in Gaza. What the Palestinians want is peace, justice, liberty, prosperity, and to live in tranquility and security with all their neighbors. The message was clear, and it was one of support for the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and for the efforts of its government under Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.

The Gala dinner honored Palestinian, Arab and American dignitaries with the sophistication their achievements deserved. The honorees were Dr. Najat Arafat Khelil, a nuclear physicist and daughter of Nablus and her husband Chekib Khelil, the Algerian Minister of Energy; the Palestinian cardiologist Dr. Fuad Jubran; and Prof. Shibley Telhami. There was also specific recognition of the contributions of both Palestinians and Americans towards peace, including Amb. Robert Pelletreau, who represented the United States in the first formal meeting between the US and the PLO twenty years ago. In short, there was a new and fresh image of Palestine presented to Washington DC, the political capital of the world.

The Gala showed that the Palestinians are both a people who believe in the culture of life and that they have contributions other than violence and the negation of others. It showed that the world cannot remain silent when it comes to the occupation. It showed that it is unfair to equate the victim with the victimizer. Above all, it effectively represented to those who matter in the United States that Palestinians, though suffering under occupation, have a culture far different from one defined by terror as claimed by Israel, especially its current government. Indeed, the government of Israel is terrorizing the Palestinian people by enforcing the occupation.

Most important of all is that is that this Gala proved beyond any doubt that ATFP knows how to play the game in the United States from within the system itself. It is a very encouraging that Palestinian Americans have begun to operate within the system, just as Israel and its supporters have. In the end, those who remain outside this system will stay on the margins and will never be able to influence the center of decision making in Washington. We should not exaggerate what the Palestinians have yet accomplished in this regard, but any journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step!

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