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Obama committed to two-state solution in ME, says aide

Media Mention of ATFP in Arab News - October 20, 2009 - 12:00am

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Barbara Ferguson | Arab News

WASHINGTON: The Obama administration is committed to creating a Palestinian state and determined to move forward with peace talks, said National Security Adviser Gen. James L. Jones, at the fourth annual gala of the American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP).

"We are clear, unambiguous and consistent. The time has come to relaunch negotiations without preconditions to reach a final status agreement on two states," said Gen. Jones, adding that he was proud to represent President Barack Obama at the ATFP event, held this weekend.

"The president is committed to achieving two states, Israel and Palestine, living side-by-side in peace and security. Make no mistake about that. He is personally committed to this goal because he believes that peace is in America's interests, just as it is in the interests of the Palestinian and Israeli peoples. The president has recognized that this will be a difficult task, but he has emphasized that he will pursue it with the patience and the dedication that this task requires."

Gen. Jones said ending the conflict and the occupation is "essential" because what is at stake is "nothing less than the dignity and the security of all human beings."

"The time has come to relaunch negotiations without preconditions to reach a final status agreement on two states: a Jewish state of Israel, and a viable, independent and contiguous Palestine that ends the occupation that began in 1967 and realizes and unleashes the full potential of the Palestinian people," Jones told the ATFP audience of over 650, which included members of Congress, current and former senior administration officials, ministers and ambassadors from numerous states, prominent policy analysts and journalists, and noted Palestinian and Arab Americans.

In his welcoming remarks at the gala, which was entitled: "Palestine Alongside Israel: Liberty, Security, Prosperity," ATFP President Dr. Ziad Asali said: "The occupation simply must end... For their own sake, courageous Palestinians have begun a new policy to build, in spite of the occupation, the foundations of a society and state in which every citizen is afforded both the

rights and responsibilities of liberty."

The black-tie gala in Washington, DC, honored three prominent Palestinian Americans: Dr. Najat Arafat Khelil, professor Shibley Telhami and Dr Fuad Jubran. It also presented a Special Recognition commemorating 20 Years of US-Palestinian diplomacy to Ambassador Robert Pelletreau.

Khelil currently presides over the Arab Women's Council Research and Education Fund and is co-coordinator of the Dialogue Project between American Jewish and Palestinian Women.

Born in Nablus, Palestine, Khelil obtained her doctorate degree in nuclear physics from the State University of North Texas, Denton, where she was the first woman to get such a degree.

"To me, the Palestinian question was and still is at the center of my universe. All the work I was doing did not satisfy my hunger to achieve results," said Khelil. "I wanted to be part of all efforts and engage in all organizations dealing with the conflict."

She said that receiving the Lifetime Achievement Award "does not mean my work is done." Instead, it would help to "strengthen my resolve even more that the modest work we have started needs to continue as the Palestinian question requires our commitment, support and attention. More than ever before, we need to solidify our efforts to bring a just and honorable peace to the Middle East where all people can live side-by-side in peace, dignity and without fear."

The ATFP Award for Excellence in Scholarship went to Telhami, whose family story is familiar to many Palestinians who have endured similar hardships.

Telhami said he came to the US at the age of 19, with a one-way air ticket, \$150 cash and "broken English."

"...My mother and father have been a driving force for me,.... my mother, Terese, was a city girl, born in Haifa, who finished fourth grade but, as the 1948 war broke out found her family taking refuge in what was then a limited village on Mount Carmel.

"My father, Zeki, raised by a widowed mother, was one of the first two villagers to ever attend high school. He was determined to be the first to finish college and planned to attend the American University in Beirut when war imprisoned his dreams, limiting him to a life of a small village in which he rounded up children off the streets and offered free education, ultimately becoming, as the villagers called him "Al-Ustad" - the teacher.

"Despite the dashed aspirations that war brought, the profound egalitarianism that my parents held was only reinforced. Instead of bitterness, there was openness. Our home knew no difference between Christian and Druze, Muslim and Jew. It was always about human beings - above politics or tribe. One must always defend what's rightfully theirs, but never at someone else's expense. Yes, for much of my childhood, I grew up with no running water or electricity with the biggest thrill being the donkey ride to the water well.

"...When my parents let go of me, their eldest of six, to seek learning in the US, it was about enabling the dreams that they could not fulfill, and a belief that in America, the sky is the limit, regardless of color or creed."

ATFP's Award for Excellence in Science and Medication Education went to Jubran, a doctor

of cardiology and internal medicine at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio.

He spoke of the need to mentor young men and women - and give them hope rather than despair: "What I really do nowadays is very simple. I pick up an intelligent, underprivileged young Palestinian or other person, and give him an opportunity for higher education. You pick them one at a time and make their lives better. It is just like lighting a candle instead of cursing the darkness.

"...It is amazing what you do when you pay special attention to a young man, how much transformation you can achieve in his life. You can bring someone from misery and make him a real contributor to society and hopefully to the world in general."

The ATFP's Special Recognition Award commemorated 20 Years of US-Palestinian diplomacy to Pelletreau, the American official who initiated the first formal contacts with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) 20 years ago.

In his acceptance speech, Pelletreau told the audience: "Today, we have a new opportunity" for peace in the Middle East.

"After eight years of passivity and neglect, the United States is organizing itself for serious peace diplomacy. We know that it will not be easy. We know there are voices out there that are opposed, in Israel and Palestine, and here in the United States, and will do what they can to derail this train and we must not allow that to happen. All of us who are supporters of peace - all of us in this room - must be actively engaged in speaking out... and never give up, and never give up, and never give up!"

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