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## Washington Insider: "Politics always interferes with policy"

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Dr Ziad J Asali, founder and president of the American Task Force on Palestine, in conversation with Michael Friedson, executive editor of The Media Line News Agency.

Dr. Ziad J. Asali is the president and founder of the American Task Force on Palestine, an organization that in a few short years has made a strong presence in Washington and Capitol Hill speaking on behalf of the Palestinian people. Dr. Asali was interviewed at The American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem by The Media Line's Executive Editor Michael Friedson.

TML: Ziad, what have you seen in terms of the transition or change from the time you began your quest until now?

Asali: That's a good question actually. When we first started in 2003, we defined our mission that establishing a state of Palestine alongside Israel is in our national interest: the U.S. national interest. That was the argument that we were pushing and advancing. It was not an argument that was based on anything in the Middle East-- Palestinian, Israeli or Arab, whatever. It was a United States-based argument, a national interest argument. So it was very gratifying to us that this very argument has gained serious ground. Of course, it has been discussed before but it has become a defining principle for the United States policy as stated by the President of the United States, Bush and then Condi Rice and now President Obama and Secretary Clinton. It was translated to a global argument with support from the Quartet, which is the whole world you know: the United Nations, Europe, Russia, as well as the United States. So everybody now says that it's within the national interest of everybody to resolve this. I think this a good argument for two reasons: It's true; and secondly, you can defend it to any people, that you are doing the thing for yourself, not doing anybody any favor. We really do think that the two-state solution is the accepted solution. There are many other options, none of which is a solution.

TML: You come from an interesting perspective, in that Washington is a city of lobbyists, everyone says, 'I want this for my interest.' Yet you appear to be saying, in terms of the Palestinian question, 'we want to be side-by-side with Israel. We're not asking to take from Israel. We are asking to add Palestine.' Is that accurate?

Asali: Yes. Of course, that is accurate. We say "Palestine alongside Israel," so it is clear to

anybody with any language that what we are talking about is the national interest of the United States and the national interest presupposes and accepts the creation of a state of Israel on the borders of pre-'67 and a new creation of Palestine alongside it, which means a historic compromise between these two nationalities to resolve the regional conflict and everybody will be getting half of what they want. Nobody will get the extremist demands of what they want. But it should be enough.

TML: Israel's own lobby is somewhat legendary. Do they share your perspective? Are they as willing to accept Palestine alongside Israel, as you are accepting Israel alongside Palestine?

Asali: I have learned several things, one of which is that nobody speaks on behalf of a whole group of people or a country. Nobody speaks on behalf of Israel exclusively. Nobody speaks on behalf of Palestine exclusively and nobody speaks on behalf of the United States—sometimes I wonder who really does speak about United States policy. But having said that, I really do think that for decades, especially after '67, there was no acceptance of the two-state solution by the Israeli lobbyists. Their real agenda was not to support the creation a state of Palestine after Oslo and Madrid, but just to continually support the Israeli government's general policy which was practically, 'maybe you say you want a two-state solution but really don't.' I have to say that over the course of the past years, certainly during the existence of our organization, we have witnessed a steady shift of the lobbyists who advocate for Israel's benefits in any way, toward a two-state solution. The most acknowledged and known entity within the U.S., described as 'The Lobby,' is AIPAC, and is clearly calling for a two-state solution.

TML: You have a difficult job in explaining for whom it is you speak. Papers are filled with the bifurcation of Gaza in Hamas hands, Fatah controlling the West Bank. How do you answer that and is it a question that's often asked on The Hill?

Asali: Yes, it is; and in fact, we really don't speak on behalf of anybody. We speak on behalf of ourselves. We, as an entity that is based in the United States, has every right to define the national interest, like any other entity like AIPAC; or the Jewish community; or J-Street; or the Latinos; or the Vietnamese; or whoever. Our perspective: we are looking for a secular, democratic state in Palestine, pluralistic. In that sense, we are clearly supportive of what the Palestinian Authority is doing, because that is the kind of government and system they'd like to create.

TML: Prime Minister Faya'd kind of shocked the world. He came with a timetable that had never before been so specifically placed: 'Two years infrastructure in place, when that happens, regardless of the position of negotiations, a state will be declared.' We just spoke with James Wolfensohn who said, that's a terrific idea. How do you feel about it?

Asali: I think it's a terrific idea, too. What is fundamentally important about it is that it addresses the Palestinian people and places on them the burden of helping themselves. It gives them urgency. It removes the victim's attitude of waiting to see 'how the world is going to treat me and resolve my problems.' It tells the people here that you can do something about the occupation, you can do something about your state and you better start doing it. I think in his analysis that building an infrastructure of a state is eventually -- within two years, he states -- going to qualify enough within the international community to say, 'yes, you are right. You have earned a state.' This is fundamentally important and I have actually written an Op/Ed about it with the title, 'You build it and the state will come.'

TML: Do you see support for that position in the diplomatic world?

Asali: Yes. Yes. Yes. Actually, the Quartet once again, which is the international community's official body dealing with the Middle East, has endorsed it already. Clearly, there is international support, both at the spoken, state level, but also at the real level. The Quartet -- which still represents the international community's official body -- is dealing with this. It has come out officially in support of this. The United States is in the process of organizing its own economic and political aid in order to help this plan and support it. Of course, the other parties cannot look for enough word of help with health and education. I think Israel is in a divided mind about it and we need to say this. When Mr. Lieberman comes out against it, and says it helps the Palestinian leadership politically but it does not speak in the name of Israel. We have not yet heard Mr. Netanyahu say it's not good. And we know that part of his program is development of the Palestinian land, economic program. So that at least, that part of it, is not going to be a hindrance to the project.

TML: You bring up Mr. Netanyahu. One of his stated frustrations is that as he calls for Israel to be very supportive of the Palestinian economy and economic programs, because of the political differences, Mr. Abbas accepts that they shouldn't move in any direction if Mr. Netanyahu has any hand at all. Is this self-serving, counterproductive -- how do you feel about it?

Asali: I think there are three issues in that one question. First off, Mr. Netanyahu was firstly speaking about economic peace. I think so many of us have had conversations with Israelis about this phrasing. Drop it. It's not good. All it means to any Palestinian or Arab is that he wants to improve the economy and deny the political realization of a state. So I am gratified that talking about the economic peace is now off the table, and now people are talking about economic development in Palestine, that's one. I think the difference between Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas] and BiBi Netanyahu now is about how to start negotiations. Mr. Netanyahu says he wants negotiations without preconditions, but don't talk about Jerusalem. That is a precondition. On the other hand, Abu Mazen says, 'I was in the conversation in the first place because we were told by the Americans [who] demanded publically, including President Obama, that there will be a settlement freeze.' How do we get Mr. Abbas to come down and negotiate while the settlement expansion continues? It's going to be exceptionally difficult. We are talking about a loaf of bread that we want to divide amongst ourselves but then you keep munching on it. So he says, 'okay, we want a two-state, let's stop.' Clearly, it's not as simple as that and there are issues to be worked out. We are living today at a week of extremely challenging diplomatic issues to be resolved mostly by the United States and these two other parties in order to say, are we going to be able to bridge this gap, get the Palestinians down from the tree where they were placed by the United States' initial offer, to the point where we start negotiations and then all the issues will be on the table. I think it was to me gratifying that President Obama, in his speech to the United Nations right after the meeting he had with both Netanyahu and Abu Mazen, he said several important things which I still think can be used very much as terms of reference to resuming negotiations. He said settlement expansion is illegitimate as far as the United States is concerned. He said we will start negotiating the final status issues right away, immediately. He included what these negotiations' status issues are: he included Jerusalem right in there, which was taken off the table by Netanyahu's public speech. And then he started the 1967 border as the starting point of negotiations. All of these things are very helpful to define the kinds of terms of references that final status negotiations can be decided on. There are other issues that need to be done -- frankly, in my opinion, practical things that need to be given right now in the political climate of today with the fragility

of P.A. system. Israel has to seriously consider if it is interested in salvaging the two-state solution for its own benefit -- not to do anybody a favor -- to give some practical issues to be presented to the Palestinians with political implications. And that is the challenge of the politicians of this moment.

TML: As we meet here to conduct this interview, the hottest issue in town is an apparent switch in position by the Obama administration. It seems that for the nine months Mr. Netanyahu was ostracized as the obstacle for peace because of the settlement building policy, almost overnight, Hillary Clinton said those same policies represent courageous concessions—"unprecedented concessions." The rhetoric coming out of the Palestinian areas is vicious. The reaction coming from Palestinian spokespeople is unrelenting. It's angry. They feel betrayed. How are you reading this as someone who is so well-connected in Washington?

Asali: Well, you summed up what happened as of yesterday. Today, there is a new rhetoric coming out of both Secretary Clinton and [U.S. Mideast envoy George] Mitchell, which is 'what the Israeli government offered is not enough and we are not satisfied, etcetera, etcetera,' and she is on her way to Cairo to talk about wanting more to do. The reality is the following: Since we are a very independent group, independent organization that does not work with any government, we are not quite reticent to say things that we know to be true. What is true is that the United States did expect to implement the settlement freeze, and did expect the Israeli government to go along initially. Because what it meant, we are talking about something in the future, it hasn't happened yet. There will be no TV pictures, no settlers removed, etcetera, and etcetera. And any politician can stand that. What's that? It still speaks to the essence of the agreement, which is two states. So you're sparing land basically for a future Palestinian state. That was the expectation several months ago. The reality is Israeli politics, and I might just add, politics always interferes with policy. It blocks policy. In Israel and Palestine and in the United States, remember that. So the reality of Israeli politics made it not possible or made the prime minister not want to implement the 100 percent freeze. This reality has become clear over the past couple of months to the Americans. They pretty much accepted that it will be less than a 100 percent freeze. However, the Palestinian leadership, President Abbas, was put in an exceptionally complicated situation. Here, he accepted the Americans' demands for a 100 percent freeze. He could not be less Palestinian than the president of the United States and now the Americans backed off and he's left holding this, you know, 'we want a hundred percent freeze.' Even if you disregard the Goldstone and other political earthquakes that have hit them, you still have to resolve that issue. You have to resolve the other issue which is ongoing as we speak and it causes a lot of frustration and fear in the Palestinian leadership, which is the issue of Jerusalem. Many things are happening in Jerusalem at the very same time, where everything up in the air, we seem to be 'what is going here?' Do they really want to exclude Jerusalem from final status right now? De facto? Is that what is being done? So what to negotiate about? It's never as simple as it seems to be.

TML: Mahmoud Abbas has indicated he may have had enough of all this. That it may be time for him to leave public life and get on with his personal life, to enjoy as many years as he can. Who is going to replace him? Who is of the status, with the respect among the people; the international reputation? Who is waiting, who can be the one?

Asali: First off, I think he is frustrated. I think he has faced a moment of great challenge this past month of the whole project that he has advocated for being in jeopardy. A Palestinian state, as he understands it. His sense is that if it doesn't work, what are we doing here? And what am I personally doing? I can see that and I can sense that. However, I don't think this is a final word. The political obituary of Mr. Abu Mazen has been written prematurely. And I think

that it's not fruitful to speculate of who is to come. It would be written if the two-state solution actually is dead and is not able to be pursued in any meaningful way by any serious people. I don't think we have reached that point and I know a lot of people speculate otherwise and like to say, 'well it's a waste of time.' Not at all. It's not a waste of time. The political solution that is called a 'two-state solution' is the only thing that actually is a solution. There are other things that might happen and none of them is a solution that would lead to stability, end of conflict. No other option would lead to that. There will be no other solution where there is a total victory for the right-wing Eretz Israel project -- people who want to get rid of the Palestinians. The days have passed where you can kill millions of people or evict them. That's gone. On the other hand, the Palestinians thinking of the extreme, on the margins, extremists or nationalists or religious thinking that if they wait long enough, then they will get rid of the people of Haifa and Tel Aviv and send them anywhere. That's just unrealistic. So the only way to keep these two peoples in the same narrow strip of land is to divide it. For a long stretch of time, before they adjust like the Italians and French, living with each other in Europe after so many wars; and the Germans. But if you seek stability and a future for the upcoming generations, you have to separate these two people into two separate states, or you can have the extremists run the agenda and make it a holy war and let them all have fun for a long time to come.

TML: So I ask you at last: in two years, will we be sitting here in Palestine? And if we do meet in the state of the Palestine, will we be meeting in a peaceful environment?

Asali: It will depend on the political will. Time doesn't do anything. It's what we do with the time that will make a difference. If truly, the Palestinian and Israeli leadership start having any negotiations, they would start out actually negotiating about negotiations, they will be currents of negotiations. There will be tracks, there will individuals contacts, but eventually if the people who have actually committed themselves at the top level to the two state solution, if they start working jointly with the United States and it is not unrealistic to expect a major push to a two-state solution two years from now, two years is a good target, but we could be sitting just a little bit beyond that and there will be a state of Palestine. I say again: It's an expression of the political will of the leadership and the people. Do they want peace or do they want what they have now?

TML: Ziad Asali, thank you.

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