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The Mideast crisis: Ziad J. Asali

ATFP

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This week's devastating violence between Israel and the Palestinians appears to have rendered the eight-week-old truce, or *hudna*, null and void. After Thursday's killing of a senior Hamas official by Israel in retaliation for a suicide bombing of a bus in Jerusalem which 20 people died. The Islamic militant group Hamas threatened revenge and formally abandoned the cease-fire.

Ziad J. Asali, M.D., born in Jerusalem, is the President and founder of the American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP), located in Washington, DC. ATFP is an organization dedicated to bringing about lasting peace and stability in the Middle East by establishing the state of Palestine alongside Israel. Asali has contributed and written for many newspapers and has provided commentary and interviews for numerous television outlets and networks, and is the author of several publications. Submit your questions on the Middle East crisis.

Arlington VA: How many Palestinian have been killed by Israeli since the start of al-Aqsa intifada?

Ziad Asali: Approximately 2,500 Palestinians were killed with 25,000 wounded. Approximately 800 Israelis have also been killed, with around 5,000 wounded.

Tulsa OK: Now that the 8 week truce is over and everyone is back at revenge and killing do you think that the road to peace can still go on?

Ziad Asali: Yes, but it will not happen without active involvement of the US and all the parties

supporting a 2-state solution.

Chicago, Illinois: Do you think the Palestinians' plight is competently represented by the various spokespersons and advocates one sees and hears in the media, on college campuses, etc. here in America?

Ziad Asali: The Palestinian case can be better represented politically and in the media. However, there is a 'victimization fatigue' for all kinds of issues and a more credible articulation of the day-to-day life of the Palestinians under occupation has yet to be presented.

Washington, D.C.: Were things moving fast enough with the withdrawal of Israeli forces, that this could have been prevented. And with the U.S. government put more pressure on the Palestinian Authority to eradicate this terrorist group and restart the peace process?

Ziad Asali: All parties have fallen short in working to avoid this breakdown. More pressure from the US on both sides to implement their assumed obligations and more restraint by extremist elements among the Palestinians, Israeli settlers and even within the Israeli government could have helped.

Chicago, IL: With the continued expansion of the settlements (whether there are "peace negotiations" occurring or not) and now the rapid building of the "security" barrier, do you believe a two state solution is feasible in the long term? Isn't a bi-national state more realistic?

Ziad Asali: A 2-state solution is the only rational outcome to prevent decades if not a whole century of conflict. All activities that preclude such a solution, including settlements, the separation wall, suicide bombings and political incompetence will make this solution less likely. Some claim it is already too late and that a binational state is the only natural outcome of continued present trends. It is hard for me to imagine that Mohammad and Shlomo will live together as equals in one state in the near future.

Comment from Ziad Asali: It is incumbent that supporters of the 2-state solution join effort to pressure all parties to restrain extremists and to build the human, political, economic and social infrastructure into a viable reality.

Anchorage, Alaska: How significant is the role of the Palestinian media in inciting violence against Israel?

Ziad Asali: The media in general has played a negative role in perpetuating attitudes of confrontation and in highlighting grievances that play to the sense of victimization of all parties. The Palestinian and Israeli media have played this game and to add to the mix the new satellite TV phenomenon in the Arab world has contributed to this sense of victimization. No party is blameless; all media should strive to stick to journalistic standards of objectivity and balance and separating reporting from editorializing.

This has contributed to tendencies for revenge rather than in achieving solutions.

Duluth, GA: What can I do to help end the terror coming from both sides?

Ziad Asali: You can make your voice heard and actively support entities that advocate peace and understanding. We have to defeat extremists above all by depriving them of the issues they use to illicit support and recruit young, desperate people.

All effort to support a two-state solution which is a historic compromise will help achieve your objective.

Providence, RI: Does the return to violence mean that the US has not taken an active enough role in pressuring Israelis and Palestinians to implement the Roadmap?

Ziad Asali: The US has taken an active role but it could be redoubled as the NY Times mentioned in its editorial today. No solution is possible without active US involvement and we have to generate enough political support here at home to see to it that the Administration leaves no stone unturned in isolating extremists on both sides and moving the process forward.

We at the American Task Force on Palestine are totally committed to this course of action in order to achieve peace. For more information please visit:

www.americantaskforce.org ^[3]

Toronto, Ontario: I still fail to see the reasons for the international pressure that has mounted against building a West Bank security fence, what are the downsides to this fence? Would it not help curb the suicide bombings?

Ziad Asali: This fence/wall/barrier can be a tool for separating parties in conflict were it to be built by Israel on its own land. However the barrier is being built on confiscated Palestinian land, separating villagers from their farms and confining Palestinians, if it is completed, to 45% of the land of the West Bank. This precludes the establishment of the viable Palestinian state advocated by President Bush. Building a wall is actually an expression of the failure of policy and politicians and what we need is bridges not barriers.

The ATFP website has a comprehensive resource page on this barrier with maps detailing the above.

Philadelphia, PA: What is it going to take for Israel to finally end its occupation, withdraw to the 1967 borders and allow the Palestinians to establish a state, with the same rights and security guaranties that Israel demands for itself? Pro-Israeli voices will demand the end of terrorism first, but that does not explain a 37-year occupation with constantly expanding settlements, home demolitions and land-grabbing.

Ziad Asali: The parties themselves are incapable of resolving this issue if left to their own devices due to the imbalance of power and their shared sense of deep victimization. Outside international, primarily American, active intervention is a prerequisite for a solution. One of the options is the introduction of a genuine monitoring mechanism to impose security as the political process to build a constitutional democratic state of Palestine.

Albuquerque, New Mexico: Dr. Asali: To what do you attribute Congress' monolithic support for Israel and its apparent insensitivity to the plight of the Palestinians as more and more of their land is taken from them?

Ziad Asali: Support for Israel has grown through the years in the US to a level many consider more emotional and less subject to rigorous and open debate. Cultural, religious and 'shared values' ties have been vigorously advocated by various segments of American society. Analysis of the positions taken by Congress on this issue show overwhelming support for Israel. Successive administrations have also shown an increasing level of support for Israel. The absence of an energetic and coherent effort by Arab and Muslim Americans and their lack of participation in the political system as Americans has contributed to this outcome too. Finally the lack of access of the average American to clear and unbiased information about the Palestinian experience is also a contributing factor.

Washington DC: During the so-called period of calm under the hudna how many Palestinians died or were injured as a result of Israeli military operations? Are these activities a violation of the Roadmap? And was their a specific military operation carried out by the Israeli government that led to the recent tragic bombings?

Ziad Asali: In general there was a significant reduction in killing on both sides during the Hudna. However, on July 3 the first death occurred when Israeli troops killed a Palestinian in Gaza followed by four Palestinian deaths at the hands of the Israeli military on August 8. In addition, scores of Palestinian were injured. These killing are a violation of the Road Map (which both parties have agreed to) which calls for a complete end to violence. Israel's killing of a prominent militant leader on August 14, was followed shortly thereafter by a suicide bombing in Jerusalem.

NY, NY: In Lebanon, Jordan, and other Arab countries, Palestinians are not allowed to become citizens or own land. Why are the human rights abuses in Arab countries against Palestinians ignored by governments, the media, and the public?

Ziad Asali: Palestinians are actually given citizenship in Jordan. However, the plight of the Palestinian refugees in other Arab countries (including Lebanon) is a stain on these countries and the Arab world.

I expect that more attention will be paid to this issue in the future than has been to date.

Los Angeles, CA: It has now become an oft-repeated addage that has been going round the international political circles that the aim of the road-map is for the creation of a Palestinian

state living "side-by-side" with the state of Israel. Two questions on that point A. How much are the Palestinian public, on the streets, reconciled to such a notion ? B. Why is it so difficult for the Palestinian public to understand that whatever sympathy they might have mustered internationally is surely drying because of the indiscriminate acts of terror being carried out by the militants?

Ziad Asali: There is no military solution to this conflict and all parties that pursue violent and belligerent means will fail.

According to recent surveys, 80% of Palestinian public support a two-state solution, with a Palestinian state comprising the Occupied Territories (ie: the Gaza Strip and West Bank with a shared capital in Jerusalem).

Indiscriminate acts of violence and terror against civilians do damage to the Palestinian cause in the world.

New Canaan, CT: Dr. Asali, Can there be real progress toward peace with Sharon in power?

Ziad Asali: Mr. Sharon has a long record of opposition to a viable Palestinian state. The Palestinians have no say in choosing the Prime Minister of Israel but a constituency in Israel for a peaceful 2-state solution do have a say in choosing their Prime Minister.

Crystal City VA: Why should we expect Israel to negotiate with terrorists if the US doesn't? We attacked Afghanistan for harboring terrorist, why not do the same to the PA?

Ziad Asali: The US did not occupy Afghanistan, while Israel has occupied Palestine since 1967.

Moreover, the US government and the the International community recognize the Palestinian Authority as the representative body of the Palestinian people and a legitimate interlocutor.

Silver Spring MD: Why did the PA openly support Iraq? What's the connection?

Ziad Asali: The PA did not support Iraq in the recent Gulf war. The PA however, did support Iraq in 1990 and the Palestinian people (particularly those 400,000 who used to live and work in Kuwait) paid heavily for that decision.

Dubai, United Arab Emirates: While I commend you on the objectives of your ATRP, how do you see your task force achieving its objectives against the huge Zionist lobby in the US that stands against your objectives?

Ziad Asali: By taking full advantage of the opportunities for speech and political participation accorded to us as American citizens by our Constitution, we can build in time and with support a respectable and effective voice. The history of other minorities in this country is replete with modest beginning that bore tremendous fruit down the line. We look for all peace minded people to help us build ATRP into an effective vehicle for peace.

Detroit, Michigan:

Would Tom Delay and the Christian Right add more gas to the fire by racist statements that were made by Mr. Delay when he called the Palestinian State " A terrorist State" ?

Ziad Asali: Yes.

Comment from Ziad Asali: I would like to thank all who have taken part in this discussion. I urge you to be involved in achieving peace in the region. Our website, www.americantaskforce.org [3] has many resources for you to learn more. Please consider adding your name to the growing list of people who support our petition for peace.

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