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Asali addresses The Israel Project

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Working With the Arab World for Peace
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Dear Jennifer,

Thank you and the board and staff of The Israel Project for inviting me to address this distinguished audience.

For those of us working here in the United States towards a reasonable and final end of conflict agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, the challenge is more daunting than in most contexts, and the stakes are higher. Those of us who care deeply about peace, Israel, the Palestinians and, above all, our own country, understand that it is our historic mission at this time to spare no effort and to work together towards achieving this crucial goal.

In this regard, allow me to tell you about the American Task Force on Palestine, what we do and why we do it, and what we'd like to see happening in the coming months and years. ATFP was founded in 2003 as a nonprofit, nonpartisan Palestinian-American organization with a simple mission: to advocate that a negotiated end of conflict agreement that allows for two states, Israel and Palestine, to live side-by-side in peace and security is in our American national interest. We are gratified that this has become official policy supported by a consensus among the foreign policy establishment in Washington, and the world as represented by the Quartet.

We neither believe nor argue that an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a panacea that will solve all outstanding issues in the Middle East, but instead we have argued that it would render all the objectives of the United States in the region significantly easier to achieve. It would remove the greatest single driving force of alienation between Arab and Muslim societies and the United States. We have maintained that it is a necessary counterattack against forces of anti-American extremism and terrorism coming from radicals like Al Qaeda,

Iran and its allies, and other newcomers, all of whom cynically use the conflict as a powerful tool to secure support and recruits. We have pointed to the undoubted economic and social benefits that would accrue by the regional recognition and integration of a secure Israel into the broader Middle East, not just to Israelis and Palestinians but to us as well. We have argued that ending the conflict and ending the occupation that started in 1967 strongly reflects American values, especially since we advocate that the Palestinian state be democratic, pluralistic, non-militarized and based on the rule of law. And we have stressed the extent to which brokering an end to this conflict would strengthen the American role as the guarantor of both international and Middle Eastern regional stability.

Obviously, these arguments deviate from the traditional approach to pro-Palestinian advocacy in the United States, which has tended to emphasize history, justice and suffering to the exclusion of directly addressing the American national interest, addressing political realities and the moral imperative of focusing on the lives of the people at the present and for generations to come. ATFP has been committed to a new attitude towards Israel and the Jewish American community. We have rejected the notion that this is a zero-sum conflict in which whatever is good for one party is bad for the other. We see the answer in a potentially win-win situation in which both parties, for different reasons, need the same thing: a negotiated agreement that ends the occupation and the conflict once and for all. We maintain that Palestinians cannot achieve their basic goal of independence and statehood without a negotiated agreement. But we similarly maintain that Israel cannot achieve peace, defined borders, regional acceptance and long-term security without a negotiated agreement with the Palestinians. There is no military solution and neither party is going to go away or capitulate. Therefore, Israel and the Palestinians are necessary partners who must reach a reasonable compromise. Simply put, forces opposed to this compromise on both sides must lose.

The corollary to our understanding is a new attitude towards the Jewish American community and its mainstream organizations. For too long, our two communities have regarded each other with deep suspicion. Realizing that the majority of Israeli and Palestinian societies need the same outcome, gives us a very different perspective on the relationship between Jewish and Arab Americans. Rather than seeing the two communities as adversaries seeking to marginalize and exclude each other, we strongly believe that an alliance needs to be cultivated on the basis of shared goals and mutual interests. One of the most maddening statistics continuously reflected by opinion polling among Israelis and Palestinians holds that a substantial majority of both societies, while in favor of a two-state solution, is both skeptical that it can be achieved and convinced that the other party is insincere and will not deliver it. This attitude is also reflected among many Jewish and Arab Americans who are convinced of their own support of a two-state peace agreement but are highly skeptical of the other side's sincerity or ability to deliver. These broad generalizations, rooted over decades of deep suspicion, distrust and negative experiences, have prevented the two groups from working together to achieve a professed common goal. This has got to change!

ATFP has argued that we must put each party to the test. We are strongly in favor of a deep and broad national alliance led by Jewish and Arab Americans in support of a two state solution. The audiences are widespread: our own government, the people in our communities who still need educating about the possibility of peace, our friends and relatives in the region whose skepticism about each other's intentions runs deep, as well as all other fellow Americans interested in this conflict. The message is simple: Jewish American friends of Israel and Arab American friends of Palestine are working together to promote peace for the benefit of our country and our own friends; That we have, with intact memories and open

eyes, put aside decades of hostility, and recriminations, and are looking forward instead of backward.

Our government, and the politicians, need know that they can rely on the support of our communities when they take reasonable risks as they bring the parties together in pursuit of peace; that we encourage them and will be supportive and patient. For far too long there has been an enormous political cost attached to risk-taking on Middle East peace, and it's up to those of us who have largely created this atmosphere to dispel it. Similarly, we need to show Israelis, Palestinians and others in the Middle East that Jewish and Arab Americans can come together and work constructively for the interest of our country and our own interests. We must overcome the mutual suspicion that while we ourselves are sincere, the other side is not.

It is essential that we recognize the deep attachment and history of both Palestinians and Jews to the land of Palestine and Israel. Both national narratives are valid and both national projects are legitimate. The two narratives are not fully compatible, and I doubt they ever will be. But in the context of a two-state agreement, there is no need to reconcile the two national narrative into a single narrative that all must accept. It is enough to accept that both narratives are legitimate in their own way and that both should be expressed through separate, sovereign and independent states living side by side in peace. Here I think, even among those elements in our communities, on both sides, that support a two state agreement there is much work to be done. Too many people who profess support for such an agreement continue to deny the legitimacy of the other side's national narrative and suggest that only one national project is genuinely legitimate. This attitude must be challenged because it undermines the mindset required to accommodate the core minimal national interest of both parties.

Many Israelis and their American friends are concerned about the 'delegitimization' of Israel, and that's reasonable and understandable. AAFP has taken a strong stance opposing any form of delegitimization of Israel. We believe that a peaceful future for the Palestinians and the entire region, can only be built when Israel is legitimized and accepted in the context of an agreement that ends the occupation and the conflict by creating a viable Palestine. However, while we firmly oppose Israel's delegitimization, we also oppose the occupation and support peaceful, nonviolent efforts to end it. We have strongly supported Palestinian efforts to build the institutional, infrastructural, economic and administrative framework of the Palestinian state under occupation, in order to end the occupation. We have also supported nonviolent protest efforts such as popular boycott of settlement goods that call attention to the important and undeniable distinction between Israel itself on the one hand and the occupation and the settlements on the other hand. Some Israelis are not comfortable with this distinction and see such efforts as part of a delegitimization campaign. We respectfully disagree. The occupation is not and cannot be synonymous with Israel since the occupation must end for peace to be accomplished. In pursuit of their own civil rights and liberties, Palestinians should be able to peacefully oppose the occupation as they pursue a non-violent quest for their own independence. We are not always going to be comfortable with everything each other says or does, but we have to try to understand the motivations and the effects of our words and deeds in light of their contribution to a peaceful end to the conflict. Israel is legitimate and must not be delegitimized, but the occupation is not legitimate and it should not be legitimized. There is a distinction between the two, and the essence of peace must be built on recognizing this distinction.

Almost everything I've spoken about here today has to do with communications, even though I'm no specialist in strategic communications. But my experiences over several decades of activism on this issue have impressed upon me the centrality of clarity and messaging to

break through the fog of stereotypes, anger, bitterness and negative assumptions. The best weapon against these regressive tendencies is clarity about our commitment to a two state agreement and to respect each other's narratives and national legitimacy in theory as well as in practice. ATFP has been consistent and, if I may say so, courageous in firmly rejecting any efforts to demonize or delegitimize Israel and opposing any form of violence or incitement. These positions, over the past seven years, have come at a considerable political and personal cost to us, but we believe that they are essential to playing a constructive role to end the conflict. I will be frank: we are hoping to see more courageous positions by mainstream pro-Israel Jewish American organizations on policies that not only delegitimize but actually threaten the potential existence of a Palestinian state such as settlement expansion. We feel that clarity about the outcome we seek and what policies promote and facilitate that outcome is essential. When we established ATFP, we did so with the understanding that there were difficult choices to make and that we have to be prepared to make them, and we have. All parties have their own difficult choices to make.

One final note on political messaging: I cannot think of a more powerful statement that the mainstream institutions of Jewish and Arab American communities can make than the emergence of a serious and influential coalition for a two state agreement. Were we to succeed in building such a coalition, we would send the most effective and profound message to our own government and political leaders, to our friends in the Middle East, and, not least, to each other as well. ATFP is committed to trying to develop such a coalition, and I hope we will have the support of groups like The Israel Project in working towards that aim.

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