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Vision for the State of Palestine

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02 February 2006

American Task Force on Palestine

[Following is a policy statement that was released publicly on February 2, 2006 by the American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP), and printed in full in the New York Times. It was drafted by Reema Ali, Esq, Ziad Asali, MD, Amjad Atallah, Esq, Hussein Ibish, PhD and Saliba Sarsar, PhD.]

(Preamble: The results of the Palestinian elections last week have elicited extensive media coverage, much of it centered on the ramifications and implications of the Hamas victory. On a more fundamental level however, no matter what type of Palestinian government is in power, a future Palestinian state should be of a particular nature and character. ATFP believes that a process of debate and dialogue should begin on this issue, and for that purpose has drafted this document to outline its vision for Palestine.)

ATFP advocates the fulfillment of Palestinian national aspirations for a politically viable Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with its capital in Arab East Jerusalem. ATFP holds that this is the only workable option for ending the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people. Palestine must be politically viable, in that it should fulfill the legitimate national aspirations of the Palestinian people for independence and self-determination. Palestine should also fulfill its promise of becoming a new democracy in the family of nations. It should provide the Palestinian people with a renewed sense of national dignity and national service, and the ability to participate in the full range of political processes at the domestic, regional and international levels.

Boundaries, Jerusalem and refugees

The territorial boundaries of Palestine will be determined by negotiators representing the elected governments of Israel and the Palestinian people. However, ATFP supports the principle stated in the "road map" of the Quartet and in numerous United Nations resolutions,

of creating a state of Palestine alongside Israel by ending the Israeli occupation that began in 1967. ATFP supports the position articulated by U.S. President George W. Bush in 2005 that any adjustments to the armistice lines of 1949 can only happen through the mutual agreement of both parties.

Palestine must be a fully sovereign member state of the UN, with jurisdiction over the West Bank and Gaza Strip and its capital in Arab East Jerusalem. In order for Palestine to be acceptable to Palestinians, it must be contiguous within the West Bank. Clearly, a major transportation route for safe passage of people and goods between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is an essential requirement. A viable Palestine should have complete control over its territory, airspace, borders, territorial waters, electro-magnetic spectrum, and fresh water and other natural resources.

Jerusalem is a central part of the present and futures of both Palestinian and Israeli societies, and is holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims around the world. For this reason, ATFP has long argued that there can be no monopoly of sovereignty in Jerusalem, which should remain shared and undivided. The viability of Palestine would be fatally undermined if Palestinian society were cut off from its social, cultural, religious, educational and economic center in Arab East Jerusalem. Without a reasonable compromise on Jerusalem respecting the rights of both peoples and all three faiths, the national political conflict between Israel and the Palestinians over land and sovereignty could be increasingly supplanted by a religious conflict that would last for decades to come.

Palestine should serve as a haven for Palestinian refugees from around the Middle East and the rest of the world. Negotiations between the elected leaderships of Israel and the Palestinian people will have to arrive at a mutually agreed solution for implementing the rights of the refugees for return and compensation as outlined in United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194.

Character of Palestine

Pluralistic: The Palestinian people have emerged from their traumatic recent history as a distinct national community within the broader Arab cultural framework. They are united by their shared experience, largely defined in terms of the conflict with Israel, and other distinctly Palestinian sources of cultural and political identity.

They are also united in their aspiration for an end to the Israeli occupation and the establishment of a state in Palestine that can realize their long-denied fundamental human and national rights.

However, within the context of that essential unity there lies a great diversity of affiliations and sub-national identities. Palestinians include a variety of religious orientations, including numerous Muslim and Christian denominations and sects. Developing as they have from a place of migration, pilgrimage, warfare and trade for millennia, Palestinians reflect a vast diversity of influences and ancestries.

Palestinian society also incorporates the universal national distinctions of regional differences, between urban and rural communities and among various social classes.

Palestine not only must accommodate these differences, it should embrace them. Palestine should be built on a set of commitments to empower all of its citizens and deliberately foster

an ethos of inclusiveness and acceptance within the national community. Palestine should be a state for all its citizens, with citizenship being the only basis for inclusion in the national community.

Palestine should set a new regional standard wherein the state shows due regard for the rights of each and every individual on the grounds of their inviolable rights as individual human beings. Palestine must base its future development on human capital and the careful cultivation of human resources.

Pluralism - which accommodates the widest possible variety of choices for the Palestinian people and embraces cultural, economic, religious, social, and political differences - is an essential element in paving the way for Palestine to become a society based on the cultivation of its powerful latent human capital. In particular, the enhancement and protection of children's and women's rights are essential to this national strategy. The right of people to live their lives with a maximum of autonomy, freedom, and protection from discrimination is the sine qua non of genuine independence and true liberation.

Faith and religion have played, and will continue to play, an invaluable defining role in the lives and culture of the people of Palestine. However, a pluralistic state in a heterogeneous society must be a secular state, in the sense that the government remains strictly neutral on matters of religion. The state may invoke or embody certain religious values, but it cannot interfere with the free exercise of religion, mandate a state religion to be followed by the public at large, or enact laws and restrictions favoring one creed or another. The Middle East, including Israel and many Arab states, is a region rife with religious passions and governments that invoke and manipulate sectarian religious sentiments and prejudices. Palestine must not fall into this same pattern of religious privilege and discrimination. It must be a genuinely pluralistic state for all its citizens, which recognizes and celebrates their diversity while it treats them equally and with neutrality. This is only possible in a secular political system.

Democratic: Palestine should be a democratic state built on foundations of pluralism. Its political structures will be based on a multiparty system without ideological disqualifiers, that regular elections ensure the consent of the governed, that there be an independent judiciary that applies the rule of law in an equitable and impartial manner, and that fundamental individual political rights such as freedom of expression and assembly are guaranteed. The credibility of the state as the embodiment of the national aspirations of the Palestinian people depends not only on the trappings of sovereignty, but also on the direct empowerment of ordinary Palestinians through the electoral and broader political process. Palestine must provide its citizens the political structures and institutions that afford them the necessary means to pursue political agendas, change and reform.

For democracy to work in Palestine, all major factions, including opposition groups, will have to agree to play by the same rules and uphold the same laws. This means no entity other than the state can legitimately employ force in Palestine, and that it will do so through national institutions that shall remain politically neutral and respect the peaceful transfer of power through fair and legitimate elections. It means that the state will have a strict monopoly on security forces and lawful arms subject to oversight by an independent court system and an elected legislature. The rule of law is critical in establishing a bulwark against any individuals or groups that would seek to reduce Palestinian democracy to its formal trappings by establishing what amounts to a single-party system, or those who would seek victory in elections with the intention of ultimately limiting which individuals and groups can or cannot

participate in future elections. Democratic constitutional structures should be protected from easy and swift change based on any single election result or the passions of a given moment.

The Palestinian people and their society are well placed to establish a fully realized democratic political system in an independent state. The national elections in January 2005 and the legislative elections in January 2006 were successfully held in spite of very short notice, the difficulties of life under military occupation, and limited external support. Nonetheless, competitive, multiparty campaigns were conducted, and the elections themselves were certified free and fair by all international observers. These elections were the result of decades of political developments among Palestinians, which have laid the groundwork for a culture of democracy. They strongly suggest that Palestinians have independently arrived at a political culture that embodies a nascent democracy, and that such elections could be repeated on a regular basis. Palestinians have a promising start from which to develop politically, but a fully functional democracy in Palestine will require not only the realization of independence, but also significant support from the outside world. Governments, international institutions and nongovernmental organizations from around the world can be of great help over time in assisting the Palestinian people and government to build a democratic political system.

Non-militarized: The Palestinian people should strongly consider creating a non-militarized state. This means relying on a politically neutral National Guard for internal stability and law and order, and a Border Guard for securing places of ingress and egress to the territory of the state, but not maintaining a standing army. Palestine is a small country that will not be able to prevail in armed conflict with any of its neighbors. The immediate order of business in the independent state of Palestine must be social and economic development. Non-militarization would realize very substantial economic benefits and free resources for investment in education and other tools for the development of human capital, which should be the foremost priority. The bedrock for a secure Palestine should be a treaty of protection with NATO, compatible with membership in the Arab League, to ensure that the territorial integrity of the state is never violated by any party. In past negotiations, the Palestinians have suggested they would not object to such protection for Israel as well, to ensure that neither Palestine nor Israel would ever be subject to attacks, as well as to ensure that Israel would never be tempted to re-occupy Palestine. These international security guarantees would be the most fundamental step the international community could take to ensure peace and stability in the region and they should be codified in UN resolutions.

A positive, stabilizing role: As a complement to a policy of non-militarization, ATFP believes that Palestine should strive to serve as a positive, stabilizing actor in the region. The Palestinian people, having endured warfare, occupation, dispossession, and exile for most of the past century, have nothing to gain by becoming entangled in any conflicts they can possibly avoid. Palestine should embody a culture that rejects warfare as a means of resolving international disputes and promotes instead multilateralism and an adherence to international law. A Palestinian state committed to peaceful coexistence, non-belligerence and military neutrality would have a powerful moral voice in promoting international legality and regional stability.

ATFP offers this vision of the anticipated and promising state of Palestine as a lasting contribution to the Palestinian national debate. It is an outline of a state that can serve the fundamental needs of the Palestinian people and that would be a positive, stabilizing actor in the region and an important ethical presence in the family of nations.

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