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# American Task Force on Palestine: A Decade of Achievement: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

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## American Task Force on Palestine

### A Decade of Achievement: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

#### - Introduction

The founding mission of the American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP) was, and remains, to impact decision-making in Washington on the importance of a two-state solution to the American national interest [2]. Having just completed its first decade [3] of work advocating for peace and Palestine, and embarking on its second decade, ATFP is issuing the following detailed set of explanations of exactly what it is, what it does and why. They are also intended to highlight and explicate ATFP's accomplishments [4] during its first decade, which have far exceeded its expectations at its founding 10 years ago.

The format of this informational overview, for convenience and clarity, is a set of answers to frequently asked questions [5] (FAQs). While such questions range from the fundamental and profound to the ridiculous and outrageous, these answers -- both individually and as a whole -- are intended to explicate, clarify and illuminate ATFP's groundbreaking approach to pro-Palestine advocacy, which is primarily aimed at accessing and influencing the American policymaking and framing debates.

During its inaugural decade, ATFP focused almost all of its activities, energy, attention, and carefully-chosen battles to establishing and maintaining our standing, access and, indeed, influence within this policy conversation and with our own government on questions pertaining to Palestine. ATFP's approach was best defined by the title of our first collection of Task Force documents published in 2007: Principles and Pragmatism [6]. ATFP is guided by a set of

ethical principles -- particularly regarding its own veracity, consistency and independence of decision-making -- and pragmatism -- which involves a clear-headed recognition of the core political, social and economic realities within which we work. These realities prompt ATFP to constantly strive to find innovative ways of pursuing our mission of advocating Palestinian statehood despite the numerous and complex constraints with which our small, but politically and intellectually robust, organization must contend. Pragmatism is essential to advancing any agenda, but it is especially required in the highly charged and sensitive challenge of advocating for Palestine in Washington.

The primary purpose of ATFP's founding strategy was the accumulation, preservation and extension of its credibility within, and even more importantly its relevancy to, the Washington policymaking and policy framing processes related to Palestine. ATFP was established in 2003 in a context in which recognition of the American national interest in the creation of a state of Palestine was by no means the consensus it has subsequently become.

The project was obviously daunting. Yet ATFP was convinced that the right approach to engagement could win Palestinian and Arab Americans a seat at the policy table, just as countless other American ethnic groups, constituencies and varied interest groups had earned over the years. We discovered -- even more than we had anticipated, and in direct contradiction to what some assumed, and many continue to insist still is, an irrefutable certainty of exclusion -- that we were not standing plaintively in front of an impenetrable barricade. Instead, we found ourselves pushing on a door that opened widely and welcomed our entry. The typical reaction of the Washington establishment to the presence of ATFP was not "what are you talking about" but rather "where have you been?"

The first, and most crucial, element to ATFP's program to develop the standing to facilitate its participation in the single most politically complicated of American foreign policy issues -- Israel and Palestine -- was integrity. Integrity, by its very definition, is a holistic quality. It requires the organization and its leadership to adhere to the best practices of institutional professionalism at every level. It requires moral clarity and political consistency. It necessitates saying the same thing to all audiences and interlocutors in every language, any venue and each medium. It does not allow for doublespeak, which is one of the most deeply rooted and damaging negative Western stereotypes about Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular. Nor does it afford space for convenient, comfortable ambiguity.

Integrity means that when there are difficult choices to be made, they are not avoided but addressed honestly, publicly, forthrightly and with full acceptance of all of the ramifications, good and bad. Integrity means having the courage to face those choices, make them with as much seriousness, wisdom and prudence as possible, and remaining steadfast in the face of any personal and political costs. Courage and consistency are the most crucial elements of integrity. Adopting popular or ambiguous, cost-free positions does nothing to establish political credibility. But making bold and principled choices, in the face of significant costs, is essential to establishing integrity. Respect, trust and standing must all be earned and maintained precisely through such tough choices and a consistently principled and pragmatic approach.

The most difficult choices facing the Task Force involved the development of an innovative approach to pro-Palestinian advocacy in Washington. The most important of these was, and remains, an emphasis on the American national interest as the paramount guide to all of our advocacy work. The Task Force decided that, if its primary aim was to have the greatest possible impact on policy, its primary constituency and the main target of its messaging must, perforce, be the institutions and individuals that make and inform policy. From its outset,

ATFP has sought to help mainstream Palestine, Palestinians and Palestinian Americans in the Washington policy conversation, and in our broader national American society and culture.

Another key choice ATFP faced had to do with its attitudes towards Israel and its relationship with the mainstream Jewish-American community. ATFP was crystal-clear, from the beginning, while it categorically opposes the occupation that began in 1967, it does not oppose the State of Israel. The *raison d'être* <sup>[7]</sup> of the organization is ending the occupation and creating a state of Palestine to live alongside Israel in peace, security and dignity. ATFP noted that major American policy consensuses are invariably the product of unlikely coalitions of political forces that may agree on little else. Effective major policy interventions require the slow, painstaking and difficult development of broad coalitions -- and often counterintuitive alliances -- that agree on a particular foreign or domestic policy goal or orientation. ATFP therefore has sought, from its outset, to build the broadest possible American coalition in favor of a two-state solution.

This has meant not only outreach to Arab and Muslim American organizations, but also many other groups with a strong interest in US foreign policy including advocacy, lobbying, think tank, academic, religious and political associations. The most important, perhaps, and certainly most innovative, aspect of ATFP's outreach efforts has been aimed at Jewish-American organizations, running almost the entirety of the ideological spectrum. ATFP has openly and deliberately developed its relationships with the mainstream Jewish-American organizations, institutions and individuals that are open to the prospect of a two-state solution. Arab and Jewish Americans do not, and may never, share the same narrative about Israel and Palestine, or the Middle East in general, among other issues. But, for different reasons, they share, or should share, a common goal: a conflict-ending two-state solution between Israel and Palestine. And no two American constituencies are more engaged with, and committed to, Israeli-Palestinian issues than the Arab- and Jewish-American communities.

Hence Jewish Americans who understand Israel's need for the establishment of a Palestinian state -- if it is to remain in any recognizable sense "Jewish" or "democratic" -- are the logical and necessary, even if counterintuitive, allies and partners for Palestinian and Arab Americans seeking to end the occupation and create an independent Palestinian state. Building bridges of understanding and common purpose across this long-standing and well-established divide has been not easy or cost-free on either side. Deep-seated suspicions are difficult to overcome, and there are considerable political, institutional, social, psychological and personal costs attached to both Arab and Jewish Americans who seek a serious conversation and are open to not merely a dialogue but potentially a partnership for peace.

ATFP's approach has also meant taking a series of independent, and occasionally controversial, policy positions that at times break with traditional and familiar attitudes. These begin, but certainly do not end, with everything that flows from emphasizing our commitment to the American national interest. Such differences are also an inevitable byproduct of our determination to face and make the hard choices when we are confronted with them. ATFP does not fudge issues, remain ambiguous or deploy messaging that either explicitly or implicitly presents different positions to different audiences. The Task Force is only accountable to its Board of Directors, but -- given the fact that many of its policy positions are innovative in either substance or messaging -- it has frequently found itself misrepresented or misunderstood.

Even when its policies are correctly characterized in the Arab-American conversation, the Task Force often finds itself paying a significant political, social, institutional and individual

price for the new approaches to an old problem -- ending the occupation -- that it has developed and pursued. ATFP, its Board and staff, do not relish vitriolic attacks or harsh condemnations, although we welcome honest and respectful dialogue. But the Task Force has understood from the outset that some of its key ideas and approaches were likely to prove controversial in some circles -- including within its own Board -- and it has been willing to pay this price because it believes it to be the unavoidable cost of success for its mission. We do not expect everyone to agree with us. On the contrary, we welcome open debate. And we hope that these answers to FAQs will help promote that debate, familiarize more people with ATFP as a model of political and advocacy engagement especially at the level of policy, and contribute more of our perspective to the community conversation.

ATFP's innovative, low-key, high-impact approach to policy work in Washington on behalf of Palestine has been the subject of vociferous criticism, particularly from the pro-Israel extreme right and the pro-Palestinian ultra left, both of which reject compromise and a two-state solution. They also typically, take inflexible positions that allow no space for alternative perspectives. Their deep ideological convictions do not allow for disagreement and they tend to personalize the debate rather than engage at the level of ideas.

ATFP's successes in developing its organizational stature, credibility and presence in Washington, and participation in the national conversation at the highest political levels about Middle East policy over the past 10 years, mean that the organization is now in a better position to spend more of its scant resources, time and energy on explaining what it is and what it does, and why, to broader public constituencies, particularly the Palestinian and Arab-American communities. As we enter our second decade of work on behalf of Palestine and peace in the American national interest, we are determined to no longer allow other, frequently hostile, voices to define us in the public imagination and popular discourse.

This explanatory overview is neither meant to be exhaustive, nor is it an essay or issue paper. Instead it is a resource for understanding and explaining the Task Force -- what it believes and says and what it doesn't, and what it does and doesn't do -- that is organic and will be systematically updated, particularly as new questions and/or answers arise. Each individual answer stands alone, and can be read individually. But, as a whole, while of necessity somewhat repetitious in places, it is also by far the most comprehensive guide of ATFP's beliefs, activities, perspectives and outlook. It is, in effect, a reference resource to the American Task Force on Palestine.

We hope that, taken as a whole, these statements, along with the rest of the work of ATFP, can help to explain and promote an important, demonstrably effective model for Palestinian and Arab American engagement in the US political system. ATFP has never, does not, and does not aspire, to claim to speak on behalf of these communities. Nor does ATFP argue or believe that it has developed or discovered the only plausible or effective approach to Palestinian and Arab American advocacy. Instead, ATFP hopes that its experiences, successes and failures, and innovations, are but one model among others, for serious, purposive and effective engagement for Palestine in the American political system.

ATFP is a vehicle and asset for those Palestinian and Arab Americans who wish to make use of it. And it can serve as an exemplar for those who want to emulate or elaborate on its approach through organizations or initiatives of their own. Others who chose a different path should make use of the openness of the American political system to advance their own agendas. The single greatest asset belonging to the Palestinian- and Arab-American communities is our citizenship in by far the most powerful country in the world, which is also a

free society that imposes no structural, legal or practical barriers to our own participation as fully engaged Americans. Anyone can assert their rights to full, equal American citizenship and help to define and implement our core, indispensable national interests, which include Middle East peace based on the creation of a Palestinian state.

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