



Published on *The American Task Force on Palestine* (<http://www.americantaskforce.org>)

[Home](#) > [Printer-friendly PDF](#) > [Printer-friendly PDF](#)

The American Task Force on Palestine: Setting The Record Straight

Issue Paper by Hussein Ibish - October 15, 2007 - 12:00am

1: What ATFP does and why it does it

Since its founding four years ago, the American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP) has been crafting a serious and constructive approach to advocacy for Palestine in the United States. ATFP's strategy is centered on promoting the US national interest in the establishment of an independent, sovereign and democratic Palestinian state, and an end to the occupation negotiated between Israel and the Palestinians and anchored in international law. All polls and surveys indicate that a solid majority of the Palestinian people supports this outcome. ATFP believes that there is an intersection among American, Palestinian and Israeli national interests in achieving an end to the conflict based on an end to the occupation.

The mission of ATFP is to promote this agenda, as American citizens, among American policymakers and opinion leaders at the highest possible levels by engaging the political system in an organized, systematic and consistent manner. A substantial and increasing number of American policy and opinion makers are becoming convinced of our national interest in the establishment of a Palestinian state, and this has been formally adopted as a US foreign policy goal. However, we have yet to achieve the critical mass whereby this aim is promoted consistently as a policy priority and is advanced in spite of domestic political opposition. ATFP's work is focused precisely on the effort to create this critical mass for ending the occupation. ATFP is determined to take full advantage of the declared American policy aim and the emerging international consensus in favor of peace based on two states, Israel and Palestine. ATFP's clear and consistent position is that it is not opposed to Israel – it is opposed to the occupation – and, more importantly, it is in favor of the American national interest and in favor of Palestine. ATFP seeks to help develop a national coalition for a two-state solution, involving all those groups – Arab, Jewish, or other American institutions and organizations – that seek an end to the conflict based on a negotiated end to the occupation, regardless of the reasons they adopt this position.

ATFP has achieved a surprising amount of progress in its mission over a short period of time and with a small staff and limited budget. It has accumulated a number of significant achievements and garnered substantial recognition and support. Surprisingly, however, the organization has also endured periodic attacks by a small group of online activists in the Arab-American community. They have persistently accused the organization of saying and doing things that it has not said or done, misunderstanding or misrepresenting what ATFP stands for and what type of organization it is. ATFP has generally abstained from replying to these

distortions and unfair criticisms, choosing instead to focus on its own work. However, remaining silent indefinitely allows such critics too much scope in shaping perceptions of ATFP through both ad hoc and systematic misrepresentations of its activities and positions.

This issue paper is intended to set the record straight about what ATFP does and says, and what it does not do and does not say.

At the center of ATFP's strategy is the art of building credibility. This involves being frank and honest, and telling the truth as we see it, however painful, to all audiences and in all languages. Pursuing a strategy of building this kind of credibility certainly comes with a political price, as the critiques of ATFP cited below demonstrate, but the long-term benefits of redefining the image of Palestinian Americans and their relationship to the political system are invaluable and indispensable.

This strategy also means refusing to allow others alone to define the Palestinian cause or the Palestinian American community. There is a prevailing assumption when it comes to Palestinian and other Arab Americans (as with many other communities rooted in the developing world) that the more strident or extreme the voice is, the more authentic it must be. This is unacceptable. Palestinian and other Arab Americans cannot allow themselves to be defined by the most vociferous voices on the far-right and the ultra-left. Obviously, there is a wide spectrum of opinion in this community, all of it legitimate in its own way. But there is no reason to continue a trend whereby solidarity only flows from the center towards the extremes, and reasoned approaches are somehow assumed to have less authenticity than more strident ones.

Among the most important characteristics of ATFP's approach is our commitment to embracing, in every possible sense, the rights and responsibilities that come with our status as Americans.

With regard to our rights, this commitment means that we stand second to no one and no other group in helping to define the national interests of our country. We are convinced, and there is ample evidence to support the idea, that the American political system is open to us as Palestinian and Arab Americans. To exercise our political rights as Americans we must organize ourselves and spend the requisite time and resources to develop our influence within American political structures. This seems obvious, and many respected Arab Americans over recent decades have made this point. However, for some in our community engaging the political system as it exists can be challenging for a host of obvious, and some more subtle, reasons. Suffice it to say that those involved with ATFP are determined to exercise our rights as American citizens to the fullest extent and to engage with our country's political institutions with as much vigor and enthusiasm as any other group in the United States.

With regard to our responsibilities, this commitment means a firm and unshakable dedication to the national interests of the United States and to keeping uppermost in our thinking and efforts our country's well-being and welfare. We are not Arabs living in America, continuing to look at the world through lenses crafted in the Middle East. We are Palestinian and Arab *Americans*, who have made a conscious and principled decision to not only reside in this country, but to deliberately affiliate with its values, Constitution and institutions. This does not mean accepting any form of irrational jingoism, bowing before misguided triumphalism, endorsing ill-advised military adventures, or automatically supporting any one party over another. It does not mean surrendering the right to criticize and critique anyone or any actions. It most certainly does not mean automatic support for specific government policies. But it does mean upholding a healthy respect for our country's political processes and the system of government that underlies them. It means not only crafting arguments based on the

national interest of our country but also thinking in those terms from the outset. It means understanding and respecting the sensibilities and sensitivities of our fellow Americans. It means not just taking our country and its institutions seriously, it means taking ourselves seriously as Americans. It is easy to say these things and to believe one means them – but quite another to put them into practice in a meaningful way. This is a core element of the both the strategy and ethos of ATRP.

Being seriously engaged with the policy conversation as it actually takes place is like being pregnant – either one is, or one is not. There is little room for anything meaningful in between. Choosing to engage our country's political system as it exists and attempting to influence decision and policy making on Palestine means operating within very specific parameters that may not be applicable to organizations and individuals operating outside or on the margins of the political system. This process is, of course, an arduous one. However, as an organization slowly builds credibility and political capital, it increasingly finds itself better positioned to calibrate its words and actions to achieve results on the issues for which it advocates. To conclude from this that ATRP's goal is not to influence US policies, but rather to change Palestinian attitudes towards those policies, is to miss the point entirely. Indeed, why any Palestinian or Arab American group would want to engage in a project simply to change our own attitudes towards US foreign policy is difficult to imagine. The whole point of ATRP's work is to help build a partnership based on the national interests of all parties to create a state of Palestine alongside Israel – in other words, to create quite a dramatic change in the political landscape of the Middle East, entirely for the better.

By definition, what we are attempting to do means involving ourselves, as an organization, in the policy conversation on Palestine as it actually takes place at the highest levels of government. This might be termed "access." ATRP has, in fact, been able to go a great deal of the way to achieving this in a mere four years of existence. The more complex and difficult task is to achieve the kind of impact whereby one can have an effect on how policy is formulated and even to help revise existing policies. This might be called "influence." Some have critiqued ATRP's approach as producing "access without influence." However, it is vital to keep a historical perspective in mind when judging an organization or community's success in developing influence on national policies. It took many decades of similar, and indeed far more intensive, efforts for other ethnic American communities – such as Greek, Armenian, Irish, Jewish or African Americans – to reach the stage where they could seriously attempt to influence or revise national policy.

Palestinian and Arab Americans cannot expect to achieve the same results overnight or without similar serious and sustained efforts. And, it is crucial to understand, there is no such thing as influence without access, even though the former is more difficult to accumulate than the latter. Therefore, the first step in any serious effort to gain influence is, obviously, to acquire access. As an American organization, ATRP focuses mainly on developing its relationship with the US government in order to provide input on issues related to Palestine. However, ATRP has built serious contacts with all three central governments involved – the American, Palestinian and Israeli governments – in view of the fact that all three parties will need to come together to forge an agreement to end the conflict and end the occupation.

It is important to note that ATRP is not and does not claim to be a grassroots or membership organization. It does not claim to speak on behalf of anyone other than its volunteer Board of Directors, its supporters, and its staff (some of whom, including the president – who has volunteered his full-time services for over four years – and this author, are entirely unpaid). We have defined our approach – which intentionally breaks with the political orthodoxy that has characterized decades of failure in Arab-American advocacy for Palestinian statehood in the United States – and are happy to let others follow their own strategies and tactics. It is

perfectly legitimate for anyone to disagree with and criticize the ideas or activities of ATFP, but not to level false accusations against it. What the Palestinian and Arab American communities need is an honest dialogue in which disagreements are thrashed out at the level of ideas and based on accurate characterizations of what other people are saying and doing.

The following false allegations – and one honest difference of opinion – have been contained in numerous critiques of ATFP that have been circulated on the internet and some email lists by a small but vocal group of increasingly shrill detractors. They reflect the kind of misinformation and misperceptions that have been all too common about the organization since its founding. This is not so much a response to any individual critique, each of which in and of themselves are relatively unimportant, as it is a long-delayed reply to dozens of similar diatribes against ATFP over the past few years, the sum total of which calls for this detailed response.

2. Falsehoods and fabrications

- **ATFP “consistently disregards and polarizes the Palestinian-American community” and “has persistently worked to... attack the Palestinian-American community”**

This assertion comes from those who simply disagree with the views and opinions of ATFP, and is plainly designed to try to discredit the organization for narrow political purposes. ATFP’s Board of Directors is made up of numerous proud and active Palestinian Americans, including many leading members of the community nationwide. These include representatives from the Arab American Institute (AAI), the Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation (HCEF) and most recently an observer from the American Federation of Ramallah. A complete list of ATFP’s Board of Directors can be found at:

http://www.americantaskforce.org/about/board_of_directors^[1]

At its first annual gala in 2006, ATFP honored three outstanding Palestinian Americans: Senator John E. Sununu, Mr. Jesse Aweida and Professor Mujid Kazimi. The 2007 gala awardees were Ambassador Theodore Kattouf, Mr. Farouk Shami and Dr. Theodore A. Baramki, another group of leading Palestinian Americans.

In addition, ATFP has established the Palestinian Humanitarian Fund appeal and American Charities for Palestine, which have raised and distributed tens of thousands of dollars for health care and other humanitarian causes in the Occupied Territories and distributed charitable donations to organizations such as St. Luke’s and Al-Makassed hospitals.

ATFP has posted its signed financial audit statements online for the entire history of the organization – an unusually high level of financial transparency. ATFP’s signed financial audit statements for 2003-2006 can be viewed in full at:

<http://www.americantaskforce.org/financials>^[2]

This is all hardly the behavior of a group that “disregards and polarizes,” let alone one that “attacks,” the Palestinian-American community.

- **The over \$155,000 ATFP raised for its Palestinian Humanitarian Fund and distributed mainly to hospitals in the Occupied Territories is a “meager sum”**

This might be considered a matter of opinion; however, no individual, blog, website or organization that has not raised significantly more for humanitarian efforts in the Occupied Territories during this same period is in any position to describe this sum as “meager.” ATFP is not primarily a charity and was not established for this purpose. However, as the humanitarian conditions facing the Palestinian people steadily deteriorated in recent years, the organization took the time to try to help as best it could. To be criticized for doing so seems bizarre, and almost to imply that those who do nothing or less are in a morally superior position to those who did the best they could. Neither St. Luke’s nor Al-Makassed seemed to feel that the donations ATFP organized were irrelevant or “meager.” To attack an organization for humanitarian fund-raising indicates much about the values and mindset of those making and promoting this deeply misguided critique.

- **ATFP does not “forward any substantive points on the two-state solution” and ATFP’s “idea of an independent secular Palestinian state is a US-backed government of thieves and their enforcers”**

In fact, ATFP has been quite substantive and specific about both the need for a peace based on ending the occupation and having two states, Israel and Palestine, living side-by-side and the nature of the Palestinian state for which it advocates. Indeed, ending the occupation is the sum and substance of ATFP’s work. This is an organization uniquely dedicated to that single, over-riding goal. The publications, articles, speeches and more in which ATFP has explained the need for an end to the occupation and two states living in peace are too many to list, but a small sample includes the following:

http://www.americantaskforce.org/in_media/in_print/2009/02/25/1235593340_5^[3]

http://www.americantaskforce.org/in_media/in_print/2009/02/25/1235593340_1^[4]

http://www.americantaskforce.org/in_media/in_print/2009/02/25/1235593340_4^[5]

In addition, ATFP has been specific about the nature of the Palestinian state for which it advocates, urging that it be democratic, pluralistic, non-militarized and neutral in conflicts, and most decidedly not led by “thieves and their enforcers.” The ATFP vision for the character of a Palestinian state, first published in the New York Times on February 2, 2006, can be downloaded in PDF at:

http://www.americantaskforce.org/position/vision_state_palestine^[6]

- **ATFP “stifles any criticism of Israel”**

In fact, ATFP has been deeply critical of many Israeli policies, especially those that underpin the occupation. Most notably, in testimony given before the House of Representatives Committee on International Relations (an exceedingly rare opportunity for Palestinian Americans to present their case before the highest levels of Congress), ATFP President Ziad Asali was critical of many Israeli policies. In his prepared statement submitted for the record, Asali specifically and in detail criticized settlements and land expropriation, the “separation barrier,” checkpoints, home demolitions and other policies of the Israeli occupation. Far from stifling criticism of such abusive policies, Asali’s testimony before a hearing of the full Committee has probably been the most high-level presentation of detailed and sustained criticism of the occupation – at least by a Palestinian or Palestinian American – before high levels of the US government in many years. This is only one, particularly high-profile, example of ATFP’s work in opposing the occupation and criticizing the policies that have led to so much suffering for the Palestinian people.

The full testimony can be downloaded in PDF at:

<http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/archives/109/98602.PDF>^[7]

The most recent ATFP statement criticizing Israeli occupation policies, in this case the ordered seizure of 1,100 dunams of land from four Arab villages in the occupied West Bank and the potential resumption of the E-1 project, can be read at:

http://www.americantaskforce.org/in_media/pr/2009/02/25/1235593354_6^[8]

- **ATFP “opposes the Palestinian Right of Return”**

This is one of the most frequently repeated falsehoods about ATFP. ATFP’s “Statement of Principles on the Palestinian Refugee Issue,” the organization’s definitive document on the issue, states clearly:

“The right of return is an integral part of international humanitarian law, and cannot be renounced by any parties. There is no Palestinian constituency of consequence that would agree to the renunciation of this right.”

At the same time, the statement holds that:

“Although the right of return cannot be renounced, it should not stand in the way of the only identifiable peaceful prospect for ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: a resolution based on a state of Israel living side-by-side with a Palestinian state in the occupied territories with its capital in East Jerusalem. Implementation of the right of return cannot obviate the logic of a resolution based on two states. The challenge for the Israeli and Palestinian national leaderships is to arrive at a formula that recognizes refugee rights but which does not contradict the basis of a two-state solution and an end to the conflict.”

This is a serious, nuanced and pragmatic approach that recognizes the right of the refugees for return and compensation as a principle that must be defended, while at the same time also

taking return seriously insofar as the modalities of its implementation have to be negotiated. This means, in practice, separating the right as a principle and the return as a practicality. Only Palestinian officials can be authorized to negotiate the details of such an agreement, subject to the ratification and consent of the Palestinian people.

ATFP also supports the Arab League peace initiative, which calls for the “achievement of a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem to be agreed upon in accordance with U.N. General Assembly Resolution 194.”

Therefore, in no sense does ATFP “oppose the Palestinian right of return.”

The full statement can be read on ATFP’s website at:

<http://www.americantaskforce.org/position/refugees>^[9]

- **ATFP serves as a “diplomatic front for the Palestinian Authority”**

This allegation reflects an unwillingness to comprehend the difference between cultivating working relations with a national leadership, whether American, Palestinian or otherwise, and serving as a “front” for one. ATFP is an American institution that is funded by its Board of Directors and its supporters. It has never received any financial backing from any government at any time. The PA has a mission in Washington led by Ambassador Afif Safieh that serves as its diplomatic wing in D.C., and another at the United Nations in New York City headed by Riyadh Mansour, and it needs and has no other such diplomatic support in the United States. It should be noted, however, that some of the individuals and websites, most notably the Electronic Intifada, which have falsely labeled ATFP “a diplomatic front” for the PA have also called on all Palestinians to “boycott” (whatever that might mean in practice) the Palestinian missions in their countries and Palestinian diplomats such as Ambassadors Safieh and Mansour.

To offer only one recent example that demonstrates the hollowness of the accusation that ATFP serves as a “diplomatic front” for the PA, a recent ATFP issue paper described Fateh as “a hotbed of corruption and mismanagement” and “a morass of petty personal domains of influence and corrosive rivalries” that engaged in “years of cronyism under Arafat and the systematic pilfering of funds that ought to have benefited the public.” The issue paper plainly states that “Fateh was, and is, in desperate need of internal reform and radical restructuring, or it needs to be replaced by an alternative secular nationalist party.” We will leave it to readers to judge whether or not these are the words a “diplomatic front” of any variety whatsoever would use to describe its alleged political masters. ATFP would respectfully suggest that such words reflect a certain measure of independence, distance and critical judgment.

ATFP’s Issue Paper, written by this author, which includes these frank criticisms of Fateh can be read in full at:

http://www.americantaskforce.org/policy_and_analysis/issue_paper/2007/09/06/1235593341

^[10]

- **ATFP constitutes the “Dahlan lobby in DC”**

Not only is ATFP not the “Dahlan lobby in DC,” ATFP is not a lobby group at all and has never claimed to be one. ATFP does not now and has never in any way served the personal political interests of Mr. Dahlan. It has never organized any Washington event for him, has never conveyed any messages to or from him at any time, or performed any other service for or joint effort with him. ATFP is a 501(c)(3) non-partisan, not-for-profit group. Organizations with 501(c)(3) tax status are not permitted to lobby, and ATFP has never had a registered lobbyist on staff or outsourced to any other professional lobbyist or lobbying organization. Many people might not be clear about the difference between an actual lobbying group and an advocacy organization, but it is unfortunate that such confusion should frequently emanate from people who fancy themselves to be political scientists of sorts. The only reason some critics of ATFP have repeatedly, one might almost say obsessively, deployed this formulation is that it is intended to inflame their target audience, without the slightest regard for the truth. Such people clearly feel that the ends justify the means and minimal honesty is of no consequence when political advantage is sought.

- **ATFP “attacked... Edward Said”**

This is a fabrication, pure and simple. ATFP has never criticized or critiqued the late Professor Edward Said, who was a personal friend of many of us. There was never an issue of contention or acrimony between Professor Said and ATFP. Indeed, in 2002, shortly before he passed away, Professor Said condemned attacks on Ziad Asali from other Arab Americans in a brilliantly argued and heartfelt article in *Al-Ahram Weekly* called “Disunity and factionalism.” In it, Professor Said condemned exactly this kind of irrational and inaccurate criticism and “the needless personal harm it did to the late Hala Salam Maksoud, who literally gave her life to the cause of ADC, and to its current president Dr Ziad Asali, a public-spirited physician who voluntarily gave up his medical practice to run the organization on a pro bono basis.” He decried this “idle and malicious gossip... [that] harmed the collective Arab cause, leaving anger and more factionalism in its wake” – gossip that corresponds to the persistent falsehoods spread about ATFP. Professor Said also noted that the campaign of vilification was motivated “*because of... success under Asali*” (emphasis in the original). Professor Said tellingly pointed out that, “organizations like ADC [and ATFP for that matter] are first of all American organizations,” an observation we also repeatedly emphasize, and the significance of which cannot be overstated. Professor Said concluded that there is a disturbing pattern among Arabs and Arab Americans in which when such “individuals and organizations... try to do something on behalf of a cause they are gunned down by troublemakers who have little else to do but destroy and disturb.”

The entire Edward Said article can be read online at:

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/599/op1.htm>^[11]

- **“ATFP actually goes as far as conflating Abunimah, Massad, Said, and all advocates of a one-state solution with HAMAS and terrorism in Iraq”**

ATFP has never conflated anyone with Hamas or terrorism in Iraq. Those Arab-American commentators mentioned in the ATFP issue paper cited above – a group by no means

synonymous with the advocates of a one-state solution in general, let alone Professor Edward Said – who have passionately defended the actions of Hamas cannot expect to have such comments go unchallenged by those of us who disagree with them. They alone are responsible for the meaning of their own unequivocal words. One should note that current opinion polls appear to show that Fateh gaining considerable support among the Palestinian people and Hamas declining in popularity – 48 percent versus 31 percent respectively about two months ago, and 50 percent to 14 percent in the most recent poll – so obviously there are quite a few Palestinians who disagree with opinions enthusiastically praising Hamas, and condemning Fateh and the PLO in the strongest possible terms. This is not to mention indefensible rhetoric accusing honorable Palestinians like Mahmoud Darwish of being, in effect, political prostitutes. Such views and such language are properly the subject of disagreement and challenge, as are the views of ATFP for that matter – as long as the dialogue is conducted honestly and without fabrications or willful misrepresentations.

ATFP's Issue Paper, also cited above, which takes issue with some of the rhetoric of some Arab-American commentators, but not that of Professor Edward Said, can be read in full at:

http://www.americantaskforce.org/policy_and_analysis/issue_paper/2007/09/06/1235593341^[10]

- **According to ATFP, anyone critical of the PA, PLO or Fateh is “either a Hamas supporter or is unwittingly serving their cause”**

As noted above, ATFP is itself critical – and at times harshly – of the PA, PLO and Fateh, so obviously this cannot be true. However, ATFP does maintain that those who heap praise on Hamas, defend its actions, and support its efforts to seize power and hold it by force can indeed be reasonably described as defenders and admirers of Hamas. To defend and praise Hamas is, in fact, to defend and praise Hamas, and people should have the courage of their convictions. This is especially true of those who claim that Hamas represents some sort of democratic and authentic movement of the Palestinian people while Fateh are simply collaborators – what one might call the “martyrs versus the traitors” mythology.

In other words, it is not criticism of the PA, PLO or Fateh – all of which ATFP engages in forthrightly and with frankness – but actual enthusiastic praise of Hamas that identifies certain commentators as admirers or defenders of Hamas, even though some are clearly not in any sense Islamists. No reinterpretation of their words is necessary. They speak loudly and clearly for themselves, as one can only assume they were deliberately intended to. The irony is that those who describe ATFP as a lobby or front for the PA or PLO while praising Hamas at every stage would no doubt (correctly) reject any effort to describe them as “diplomatic fronts” for Hamas. This is not in any sense an accusation ATFP or I have made or are making now. But were one to apply the same logic to these individuals and their statements that they use in describing ATFP as a “front” for the PA, it would inevitably produce that very conclusion. And this, of course, shows precisely what is wrong with their logic. One cannot have it both ways.

- **ATFP “rules out accommodation between Palestinian political factions” and derides reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas as “utopian”**

ATFP does not in any sense “rule out” an accommodation between Palestinian political factions. In its policy focus paper on “Palestinian National Unity: The Question of Hamas” published on August 29, 2007, ATFP argues in favor of a resumption of national unity and lays out the basis upon which it feels that could best take place:

“...the best way out would be through an agreement with Hamas and Fatah that would allow the former to reenter the PA. However, attempts to reach such an agreement must draw lessons from the failure of past attempts. Primarily, for any agreement to be sustainable it should deal with the fundamental political issues at stake. Hamas must accept a negotiated two-state solution as included in the PLO charter, renounce violence and terrorism, and abide by previous PLO agreements.”

This position may not be pleasing to those who admire, defend or support Hamas’ extreme positions opposing all existing Palestinian agreements and the corpus of international law on the question of Palestine, but it hardly amounts to “ruling out” an accommodation. In fact, it is a specific conceptualization of what a real accommodation would look like in practice. Moreover, at its October 3, 2007, briefing at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace on the same topic, ATFP Advocacy Director Ghaith Al-Omari repeatedly stressed that the issue facing the Palestinian parties in terms of reconciliation was essentially a matter of timing and conditions, not the obvious desirability of an accommodation.

As for the assertion that ATFP “derided reconciliation between Fateh and Hamas as ‘utopian’” in the issue paper “Sense, Nonsense and Strategy in the New Palestinian Political Landscape,” anyone who came away with this impression did not read the paper carefully. What it says is: “And it is in the possibility of an agreement to end the occupation that realistic hope for the future of Palestine lies. The real alternative is not some utopian reconciliation and post-nationalist bliss, but rather unending conflict and untold suffering.” Plainly, the agreement to end the occupation referred to here would be between Palestinians and Israelis, not Fateh and Hamas. The “utopian reconciliation and post-nationalist bliss” again, of course, would be between Israeli and Palestinian societies, not rival Palestinian groups. The obvious meaning of the text is that an “unending conflict and untold suffering” would be the consequence of not crafting an agreement between Israelis and Palestinians to end the occupation, not anything to do with relations between Palestinian factions.

The policy focus paper on “Palestinian National Unity: The Question of Hamas” can be read in full at:

http://www.americantaskforce.org/policy_and_analysis/policy_focus/2007/06/17/1235593351
[12]

The October 3 briefing on the same subject can be listened to in full at:

http://www.americantaskforce.org/in_media/pr/2009/02/25/1235593354_7[13]

- **ATFP makes an “unqualified assertion that Israel’s occupation is not analogous to Apartheid South Africa”**

This is a complete misreading and misinterpretation of the reference to South Africa in a recent article by ATFP Executive Director Rafi Dajani and Advocacy Director Ghaith al-Omari. In the article, they refer to what they call a “false South African analogy” not in the context of the nature of the occupation – which indeed does resemble and in some ways even is

significantly worse than conditions in apartheid South Africa – but in the context of visions for the political future of Israelis and Palestinians. One might note that while ATFP has not done so, the respected Palestinian-American historian Professor Rashid Khalidi of Columbia University has in fact raised serious questions about the analogy between the system of apartheid and the mechanics of the Israeli occupation (although he too feels that in some ways the latter is worse than the former). In his most recent book *The Iron Cage* (Beacon Press, 2006), Khalidi argues that “the parallels with South Africa are only superficially accurate” and that “there are only limited parallels between the defunct apartheid system and the comprehensive and sophisticated matrix of control that Israel has created” in the Occupied Territories. At any rate, is perfectly clear from the Dajani-Omari article that they are referring to and rejecting the idea that a one-state solution between Israelis and Palestinians along the South African model is a sensible analogy or a workable model as a *solution* to the conflict. That is completely different from rejecting an analogy between the characteristics of the Israeli occupation and the system of apartheid that used to be enforced in South Africa. Indeed, ATFP does consider the analogy of a South Africa-style solution between Israelis and Palestinians to be, as the article clearly states, “an impossible illusion that... distracts dangerously from difficult yet achievable goals,” but this in no way characterizes, and does not in any sense address, the nature of the occupation.

The Dajani-Omari article can be read in full at:

http://www.americantaskforce.org/in_media/in_print/2009/02/25/1235593340_0^[14]

- **The Bush Administration “offers a more complimentary and accurate depiction of the Palestinian people than ATFP”**

One of the most telling features of several recent critiques of ATFP has been the willingness of some bloggers to rip ATFP statements radically out of context in order to try to cast the organization and its leadership in a bad light. One very glaring example of this kind of dishonesty was the recent use of the following quotation from ATFP President Ziad Asali, which has been widely circulated on the internet: “The Palestinians, frankly, are a ragtag people, many who barely speak English. And whatever they say is often offensive and then used against them.” This was then juxtaposed with a statement by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the 2006 ATFP gala: “The Palestinians are some of the most talented, best educated, and hardest working people in the Middle East.” This juxtaposition is a transparent effort to suggest that ATFP – a Palestinian-American organization – is somehow less sympathetic to the Palestinian people than the Bush Administration and to “reveal how the organization truly views those it alleges to represent.” That, among many other efforts to enhance the image of Palestinians in the United States, ATFP hosts an annual Washington gala specifically dedicated to honoring the achievements of Palestinian Americans is apparently not a significant enough indication of its sentiments.

This deliberate deception is fully revealed only when Dr. Asali's quote is placed in its full context, which was part of a debate with Mitchell Bard on media coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict held at 16th World Media Forum in August, 2007. At the event, Asali was analyzing various structural factors that lead to western media coverage that is more sympathetic to Israel and Israeli perspectives than to those of the Palestinians. He explained that one of Israel's built-in advantages stems from its status as a well-organized state as opposed to a people living under occupation. The full paragraph reads:

"There is the other factor that Israel is a real country. It is a country with establishments and institutions that deal with the press. Part of their State Department – foreign ministry, it's called – has its own many multi-faceted media outlets that connect with the Western-based reporters in the region, making it easy to get the Israeli story. The Palestinians, frankly, are a ragtag people, many who barely speak English. And whatever they say is often offensive and then used against them. So it is not hard to see that there is a built-in problem here."

Can anyone deny that the Israeli propaganda machine and government efforts to spin the press have no analogue on the Palestinian side? Is what Palestinians often say not well calibrated to connect to a western media audience and then indeed used against them? More importantly, in context do these words not convey a completely different impression than when ripped out of the media analysis of which they were a part and juxtaposed not to the Israeli media-management system but to a random statement by Secretary Rice? Are people not being deliberately misled?

The text of Ziad Asali's comments at the 16th World Media Forum can be read in full at:

<http://www.wmassociation.com/proceedings/16index.html>^[15]

Those who disagree with ATFP should take issue with its actual views and actions, and not false and fabricated allegations, or with quotations ripped from their context and re-presented to create a completely misleading impression of what ATFP is saying and doing. We are a mature and intelligent community with plenty of room for many views, approaches and orientations. And we should feel free to disagree with each other. But we must do so respectfully, and with due regard for accuracy and the facts.

3. An honest difference of opinion

And so, at last, to an honest difference of opinion:

- **ATFP was wrong to welcome Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice as the keynote speaker at its first annual Gala in October 2006**

ATFP is an *American* organization. It argues that a change in our approach to the question of Palestine is in our country's national interest, and does so in part by dealing with the most senior policy makers in our country. While ATFP is not a lobby, we do work within the American political system, including engaging the White House, Congress, the media, think tanks and other influential policy organizations, since history strongly suggests that this is the approach that, for other constituencies and communities, has yielded the greatest successes. There are many other approaches to promoting the cause of the Palestinian people in the United States, but this is the one we have chosen. We strongly believe that our approach is an indispensable contribution to advocacy for Palestine in Washington, D.C., and beyond.

We were very proud that the Secretary of State spoke at our Gala last year. Some of ATFP's critics derided the organization for having "honored" Dr. Rice with the invitation. But the bitter truth is that no Arab- or Palestinian-American group is in a position to "honor" the senior policy makers of our country with an invitation to speak at our events – as a community we simply have not acquired that level of clout or leverage, and narcissistic fantasies about our inherent greatness and importance by virtue of simply being Arabs are merely self-deluding. In fact, the Secretary of State honored us by speaking at our event, and her presence was in itself a valuable recognition of the importance of the issue of Palestine to the United States. Is it better to shun and be shunned by those who make policy, or to have them begin to engage and take us and our issues seriously?

What was even more significant was what Secretary Rice had to say, including this remarkable sentence: "I can only tell you that I, too, have a personal commitment to that goal because I believe that there could be no greater legacy for America than to help to bring into being a Palestinian state for a people who have suffered too long, who have been humiliated too long, who have not reached their potential for too long, and who have so much to give to the international community and to all of us." Let me emphasize that phrase: "there could be no greater legacy for America than to help to bring into being a Palestinian state." Stop reading and think about that for a minute. Is it the Balfour Declaration? Not quite. Is it an announcement of a major shift in policy? No, it's not. But is this the tone we are used to coming from the senior most American officials on the issue of a Palestinian state and an end to the occupation? Have we ever heard this kind of language before from a secretary of state? Obviously not, and it is plainly significant, perhaps even historically so.

Some of the Arab and Arab-American reaction to these unprecedented words was muted or dismissive – "*kalaam, kalaam*" some said derisively, "words, words." However, language shapes both the tone and substance of policy – indeed, the aforementioned Balfour Declaration was just that: words. And, of course, we do not hesitate to become deeply concerned and even outraged about words that run in the opposite direction. A mature political movement regards words like these as valuable political capital and indeed an achievement, and does not cast them derisively aside with contempt and disdain as if they had no meaning or value.

Or as if they had no cost. The radical pro-Israel right was infuriated and enraged in the extreme with Secretary Rice for these remarks, seeing both their significance and the need to extract a price for having made them. Morton Klein of the Zionist Organization of America fumed, "Secretary Rice... delivered the most pro-Palestinian speech in memory by a senior U.S. administration official" and protested that, "I was not prepared" to hear such words from a senior American official. "If the president does not subscribe to the themes in her speech, he should publicly distance himself from it immediately," Klein added. Indeed, for days after the ATFP gala, White House spokespersons were persistently asked to repudiate Secretary Rice's comments or distance President Bush from them. They declined to do so. For example,

at the White House briefing on October 17, 2006, President Bush's then-spokesperson Tony Snow said, in response to a direct question about the "no greater legacy" statement that, "he [President Bush] stands absolutely behind what the Secretary of State said."

The Jerusalem Post described the speech as an "unprecedented address." It also published an op-ed complaining that, "the secretary gave in to the impulse to rhetorical overkill and wound up implicitly comparing the Palestinian nationalism to America's founding fathers and the US civil rights movement." *The Washington Times* condemned Secretary Rice for calling "for the creation of a Palestinian state -- likening it to the efforts of America's Founding Fathers and the heroic leadership that enabled the country to survive the Civil War and defeat segregation and Jim Crow." *The Times* then published an op-ed blasting the Secretary for "comparing the Palestinian cause to her own civil rights struggle growing up in segregated Birmingham, Alabama." Israel Insider sputtered, "Come off it, Condoleezza. You had to have winced reading out some of the diatribe in that speech, which apologized and lauded terrorism."

Evangelical columnist Joe Farah was so infuriated by the speech that he wrote, "I've waited to deal with the following news development because it is so disturbing to me personally, I needed to let my rage subside. I can now speak and write coherently about the latest ghastly statements by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice concerning the Middle East. But it's not easy." His conclusion: "She has deliberately chosen to side with evil – the kind of people with whom we are supposed to be at war. It means that her boss, President Bush, is committed to this evil path as well." David Horowitz's *Frontpagemag.com* held that because of the speech, "Condi is more than a ditzzy cheerleader for Palestinian nationalism. She's also a facilitator [of terrorism] par excellence." Horowitz published another article chiding, "No, Dr. Rice...there's nothing noble in such a self-centered, murderous cause." The *Jewish World Review* summed up the extreme pro-Israel right's reaction to Secretary Rice's speech at the ATFP Gala succinctly by demanding her resignation from office: "She needs to go."

Those who saw and continue to see no value in the invitation to Secretary Rice or to her remarks at the ATFP gala need to ask themselves if the Palestinians would really be better off without these comments on the historical record. Is it possible that the pro-Israel right, with its heated and overwrought reaction to these words, was in fact seeing something that some in the Arab-American community failed to see? How can providing a platform and an environment conducive to the delivery of what unquestionably was the most sympathetic speech to the Palestinian people and cause ever made by a senior American official have possibly been a bad thing?

The text of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's address at the first annual ATFP Gala on October 11, 2006 can be read in full at:

<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/73895.htm>^[16]

In addition, the text of the keynote speech by Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns at the second annual ATFP Gala on October 17, 2007 can be read in full at:

https://www.americantaskforce.org/keynote_address_nicholas_burns_atfps_second_annual_gala^[17]

One final point on this issue: some of ATFP's critics set up a remarkable "catch-22" for the organization with regard to engagement with senior government officials. On the one hand, when such invitations are proffered and accepted, no matter what the result, the accusations are that the organization "fawns over" such dignitaries and "parrots their rhetoric" – in other words that such engagement amounts to some sort of sell-out to power. However, in the next

breath some of these same critics then complain that ATFP does not yet have as much influence on “Washington policy makers and political leaders as other lobbies.” In other words, when such engagement is successfully pursued, it amounts to a kind of disloyal betrayal, and when invitations to senior officials are not accepted or overall progress is slow-going, it amounts to proof that the strategy does not and indeed cannot work. Either way, ATFP can be condemned as treasonous or ineffective, respectively – or in some amazing pretzel-logic formulations, as both simultaneously. Of course, it is neither.

As patriotic American citizens and as taxpayers, the members of the Board of ATFP and its staff are proud of its achievements, its positions and the caliber of its work. Above all, ATFP is confident that it has found a voice that resonates with policy and opinion makers in our country to help promote an end to the occupation and the creation of a state of Palestine. We take the criticism dealt with in this issue paper as an indication that we are doing things that matter. We are confident that they matter enough to make a significant difference. Obviously, the trail that ATFP is blazing is a long-term one and requires the patient application of effort and painstaking development of credibility and clout over a sustained period of time. But there is no shortcut to developing this over time, and no serious alternative when it comes to influencing US government policy.

Hussein Ibish is a Senior Fellow at the American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP).

TAGS: [E-1](#) ^[18] [Hamis/Fatah Reconciliation](#) ^[19] [East Jerusalem](#) ^[20] [One State Solution](#) ^[21] [Peace Based on Two States](#) ^[22]

[Events](#) | [Daily News](#) | [About Us](#) | [Resources](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Donate](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

[RSS Front Page Features](#) [RSS World Press Roundup](#) [RSS ATFP in the News](#) [RSS Policy and Analysis](#)
[RSS Briefing Summaries](#)

Source URL (retrieved on Oct 19 2019 - 3:37am):

http://www.americantaskforce.org/policy_and_analysis/issue_paper/2007/10/15/1235593341_0

Links:

- [1] <http://www.americantaskforce.org/about.php?type=board>
- [2] <http://www.americantaskforce.org/about.php?type=financial>
- [3] <http://www.americantaskforce.org/inmedia.php?type=print&id=34>
- [4] <http://www.americantaskforce.org/inmedia.php?type=print&id=11>
- [5] <http://www.americantaskforce.org/inmedia.php?type=print&id=55>
- [6] http://www.americantaskforce.org/pdfs/atfp_vision.pdf
- [7] <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/archives/109/98602.PDF>
- [8] <http://www.americantaskforce.org/inmedia.php?type=press&id=26>
- [9] <http://www.americantaskforce.org/positions.php?id=5>
- [10] http://www.americantaskforce.org/policy_and_analysis.php?type=issue&id=1
- [11] <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/599/op1.htm>
- [12] http://www.americantaskforce.org/policy_and_analysis.php?type=policy&id=1
- [13] <http://www.americantaskforce.org/events.php?type=atfpevents>
- [14] <http://www.americantaskforce.org/inmedia.php?type=print&id=2>
- [15] <http://www.wmassociation.com/proceedings/16index.html>
- [16] <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/73895.htm>

- [17] <http://www.american taskforce.org/inmedia.php?type=speeches&id=9>
- [18] <http://www.american taskforce.org/e1>
- [19] http://www.american taskforce.org/palestinian_unity/hamas/fatah_reconciliation
- [20] http://www.american taskforce.org/east_jerusalem_0
- [21] http://www.american taskforce.org/palestinian_statehood/one_state_solution
- [22] http://www.american taskforce.org/palestinian_statehood/two_state_solution