Q: How did ATFP President Ziad Asali gain access and influence in Washington?

A: Dr. Asali spent many years working as a physician and leading community member in Taylorville, Illinois before relocating to Washington immediately after his retirement from the medical profession. During those years in Illinois, Dr. Asali had ample opportunity to learn how the fundamental American economic, political and social system operates, within smaller communities, on a statewide level and, by extension, nationally. The same essential processes and culture are operative across the board in our country. Dr. Asali, therefore, did not arrive in Washington directly from Palestine. Instead, he spent several decades of hard work and close examination of the way the American system operates before he began his full-time work with ADC and then ATFP.

It is, however, true that there are many other Arab-Americans who have spent more time in Washington but accumulated much less access and influence than Dr. Asali. In that sense, his relative success can appear uncannily swift. There are two primary reasons why this is the case.

First, Dr. Asali applied the lessons he had learned in the Midwest to Washington, understanding that the American system operates similarly across the board. Straightforwardness, consistency, transparency and discretion -- to name a few of the key attributes -- he found to be placed at a premium throughout American society. He was also able to develop and present, along with his colleagues, a series of policy interventions, initiatives, inputs and international contacts that were designed to help realize the consensus American policy position in favor of a two-state solution.

Second, because of the approach ATFP has pioneered, it did not find itself knocking on a locked door, as some anticipated. Rather, the primary question ATFP encountered upon its emergence in the Washington policy scene was not, "what are you talking about," but "where have you been?" Because ATFP was able to ensure that its clear commitment to the American national interest was widely recognized, and became noted for its consistency and integrity, its value-added was quickly understood by the policymaking and policy framing
communities. To some extent, Dr. Asali and ATFP have been beneficiaries of a political version of the law of supply and demand: there simply hasn't been anything like it in the past, and its usefulness to the goal of creating a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine under American auspices, with strong Palestinian-American participation in the process, was quickly evident.

However, the real key to Dr. Asali and ATFP's successes has been following the time-honored and tested model of engaging with the American political and policy-making systems according to its long-established rules and structures, as all other successful American organizations, groups and individuals have. We have attempted, successfully, to work within the system, as it exists, rather than quixotically trying to change or challenge it. All the while we have held ourselves accountable to ourselves, our mission and our institutional integrity. In the process, Dr. Asali and ATFP have demonstrated that the American policy-making system is, indeed, open to Palestinian and Arab Americans, their perspectives and their input, if they approach it with seriousness, integrity and a real commitment to our own American national interest.

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