Q: Why is ATFP President Ziad Asali sometimes a target of angry criticism?

A: This question, and its answers, could not be more revealing. Dr. Ziad Asali needs no lectures on the painful history of the Palestinian people and their suffering and tragedies over the past 65 years, having experienced many of them firsthand. He became a refugee in 1948 when his family fled West Jerusalem for East Jerusalem during heavy fighting, in which his sister was wounded. His family can trace its written, documented history in Jerusalem back at least 600 years. Dr. Asali was finishing medical school in Beirut in 1967, and was not permitted to live and work in East Jerusalem by the new Israeli occupation authorities following the war. His family lost several properties to the conflict and the Israeli occupation.

His views and positions have been shaped by the sum of a typical Palestinian experience, not only in the hardships endured but also the will and agency exercised to overcome these challenges. They were also shaped by his experience as an American, coming to the United States as an immigrant and being embraced by this country and given the opportunity to succeed and excel in his profession as a physician.

His belief in the justice of the Palestinian cause, the pressing, real need to end the occupation and realize a two-state solution as the only way to end the Palestinian plight, and his faith in the openness of the American system, are what drive his own work and that of ATFP.

Dr. Asali, who was the founder of ATFP, has worked full-time for the organization for over a decade without receiving any compensation of any kind. Indeed, he and his wife have annually contributed to ATFP out-of-pocket since its founding. All of his work has been entirely pro bono and completely uncompensated. In addition, his wife and fellow ATFP board member, Naila Asali, has also worked as a full-time volunteer at the Task Force for over 10 years. She had previously served as the Chair of ADC for five years. Given their professional careers and the value of their time, this in-kind contribution of labor must be calculated in the millions of dollars. “Sellout” is the last characterization that could possibly be made of the Asalis given that this is how they have chosen to spend their retirement and savings (although when informed of this, some critics have decided to dub them with the ludicrous oxymoron of
Dr. Asali has been the continuous target of vicious and personalized attacks by those who do not agree with ATFP's mission, goals, tactics and strategies. Despite this, he continued to contribute his time and energy without any recompense. Dr. Asali and ATFP have been accused of being "sellouts" on various issues, including refugee matters. But the use of "sellout" as a pejorative against Dr. Asali is also intended to express disapproval that he and ATFP work within the American political system and with the policy establishment. A commitment to working within the system and with the establishment to pursue its mission is at the core of ATFP's approach.

Moreover, it is hardly within Dr. Asali's - or, for that matter, any individual's – ability to "sell," or in any other sense "give up," collective and individual rights that belong exclusively to the Palestinian people. They have a national leadership, and an internationally recognized body, the Palestine Liberation Organization, which is the only entity entitled to represent the Palestinians diplomatically and legally, and to negotiate on their behalf. Dr. Asali is not a member or official of the PLO, and does not take part in the negotiations, which will determine the outcome of all of these issues. He has not sought or accepted any official position with any government or governmental agency whatsoever.

This preposterous mischaracterization of Dr. Asali as a "sellout" is almost always a function of a broader attack on ATFP's carefully-thought through, purposeful policy of working with the policy establishment in order to both impact policy across the board and get things done on the ground to help the Palestinian people (see the summary of some of ATFP's accomplishments [5]). This constructive, serious approach is the essential basis for what ATFP has been able to achieve at multiple registers and with very limited resources.

This deliberate policy of broad engagement was embarked on at ATFP's outset in 2003, in the full knowledge of the significant personal and political costs it would entail, because of the potential benefits they would likely have for the Palestinian people. ATFP's first decade of pursuing this policy has proven that these benefits can be real, tangible, meaningful and consequential, particularly in the daily lives of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation.

Dr. Asali's entirely uncompensated and sustained commitment to ATFP over so many years is in keeping with the great American tradition of civic engagement. His hard-won personal standing in the Washington policy community and his demonstrable success in leading ATFP to unprecedented levels of access and influence is proof that our nation's policy-making process is as open to Palestinian Americans as it is to all other Americans.

Disagreement with Dr. Asali’s views and ATFP's approach is natural and indeed healthy given the complexity and diversity of the Palestinian experience in the past and present. A vibrant debate and a multiplicity of approaches are needed to address the various facets of the Palestinian issue. What is neither natural nor healthy, however, are the attempts by some to silence him and others by arguing beyond the bounds of propriety and stooping to character assassination.

In particular, the deeply personal and insulting character of many of the false accusations leveled against Dr. Asali are not only outrageous, they actually impugn these critics themselves rather than Dr. Asali or ATFP. Decrying such a vicious attacks against Dr. Asali in 2002, the late Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said described him [6] as “a public-spirited physician who voluntarily gave up his medical practice to run the organisation on a pro bono
basis." Professor Said noted that it was precisely "Because of this success under Asali" [emphasis in the original] that he and his organization were being subjected to "a campaign of personal vilification masked as ideological argument." These attacks have continued until this very day, and have not changed in tone, substance or intent since 2002. Professor Said cited [6] the campaign of personal invective against Dr. Asali which, if anything, has only intensified in the past 12 years, as a prime example of the crippling "disunity and factionalism" that plague Arab and Arab-American causes, particularly that of Palestine.

Dismissing Dr. Asali’s deep and complex experience through ad hominem attacks – while simple and easy, no matter how unfair – does a disservice to the interests of the Palestinian people, the diversity of the Palestinian-American community, and – perhaps most importantly – the truth itself. The real answer to such criticism is the standing that ATFP and Dr. Asali have earned in the Washington policy community.

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