Q: Why do some claim that ATFP was a Republican organization during the Bush administration, but switched to being a Democratic group during the Obama administration?

A: The fact that this question is asked at all, and unfortunately it frequently is, demonstrates a relative unfamiliarity with how American nongovernmental and public educational organizations are actually structured and work. ATFP by both law and policy is a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan, nonpolitical organization, although it works within the policy realm on an issue that has been defined by a consensus to be national security interest. Such issues often transcend partisan political divisions. Therefore, ATFP never has been, and never will be, a functionary of any political party.

The misunderstanding arose due to the fact that ATFP was able to establish strong working relations with the executive branch quickly after it was founded in 2003, during the Republican administration of Pres. George W. Bush. But ATFP did not achieve its access and influence during the Bush administration by being Republicans or in any sense associated with the Republican Party or any of its apparatuses. Instead, ATFP was a relatively new Arab-American phenomenon: a genuinely American and genuinely nonpartisan organization that did not take sides or part in elections or partisan squabbles but instead focused on policy issues that continue through different election cycles no matter which party is in power. The question of Middle East peace and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is precisely such an issue. It remains an American national security imperative no matter who is elected or appointed to executive office or policymaking positions.

The woefully mistaken impression that ATFP was essentially a "Republican" organization because it had developed strong relationships with the Bush presidency gave rise to profound confusion in some quarters when the Task Force was able to maintain its ties to the executive
branch under the Democratic administration of Pres. Barack Obama. One answer to this presumed conundrum was that ATFP must have suddenly switched, opportunistically, from being a Republican-oriented group to being a Democratic-oriented one. Not only is this absurd on its face, it misses the entire point of how the American policy process actually works. In fact, ATFP was never a "Republican" organization during the Bush administration, and it is not now a "Democratic" one either. ATFP does not get involved in partisan politics. As a policy organization, it instead seeks to work with whoever the American people elect as president or in Congress, and whatever group of policymakers are then appointed or promoted. Our ideas are based on consensus American views about foreign policy goals, above all the vital American national interest in securing a negotiated two-state solution based on the creation of a Palestinian state to live alongside Israel in peace, security and dignity.

ATFP has been able to develop and maintain strong relations with both Democratic and Republican administrations during its decade-long history because it has brought genuine value-added inputs to the policy making and framing conversations. ATFP can speak just as easily with Democratic or Republican policymakers or officials because core American interests do not change between elections and because ATFP does not take sides in those elections. ATFP notes that this question is never asked of the most influential and established American single-issue policy groups or commercial interests. It is taken for granted that American entities and organizations which have an interest in helping to influence, shape and realize American policy goals -- unless they are designed explicitly to be partisan and to help to determine election outcomes -- all work with both Democratic and Republican presidents and Congressional leaderships.

ATFP has been uniquely singled out in part because it is assumed by some that the normative American policy input system is somehow closed to Palestinian or Arab Americans. One of ATFP’s most important accomplishments has been to demonstrate that this is not the case. Arab-Americans are not shut out of the system. They need not perforce join the partisan political process, although that is an essential aspect of becoming fully engaged in the American system. And, indeed, ATFP has often felt the lack of strong Arab-American political organizations as it tries to approach its own policy work. But what ATFP has shown is that a non-partisan, non-political, policy-based Arab- and Palestinian-American organization can take part effectively and in a sustained manner in the policy conversation. While political groups are also needed, policy organizations that are not involved in partisan competition are indispensable.

Therefore, the simple answer is that ATFP was never a "Republican" organization in the first place, let alone has it switched to being a "Democratic" one. It is a nonpartisan organization, and it is precisely this standard American practice that has allowed it to maintain strong relations with administrations from both parties.