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Alumni Profile

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ALUMNI PROFILE



AMJAD ATALLAH, a 1999 graduate of the Washington College of Law (WCL) and a former Ph.D. candidate in religious studies, once vowed he would never become an attorney. But when a career in academia seemed too disconnected from the issues that he cared about, he pursued a law degree to effect change in a more direct way.

In his current position as legal advisor with the Adam Smith Institute, a London-based non-profit organization, Mr. Atallah promotes peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians and acts as a liaison between the Palestinian negotiating team and the U.S. government. In this capacity, he has worked extensively on the Road Map for Peace in the Middle East and on questions of international intervention in the on-going conflict.

Mr. Atallah started his career with the Adam Smith Institute in Ramallah, where he was placed from 2000 to 2002. While in Ramallah, he provided legal advice and services to Palestinian officials in an effort to aid the Middle East peace process. This project, initiated by a consortium of European governments, recognized the lack of legal expertise available to Palestinians. Before the initiation of the project, Palestinian officials often criticized agreements presented to them, but without the legal expertise needed to draft an agree-

ment, they were unable to bring their own ideas to the negotiating table. With the assistance of full-time attorneys provided by the project, Palestinian officials are now able to more actively participate in negotiations with Israel and other countries involved in the peace process.

Although Mr. Atallah was placed in charge of the Security and Borders portfolios, he spent much of his time on the day-to-day negotiations between the Palestinians and the United States in desperate attempts to end the conflict and return to the negotiations that almost culminated in an Israeli-Palestinian agreement in February 2001. The daily negotiations included a line of successive American efforts led by Senators George Mitchell and Warren Rudman, CIA Chief George Tenet, General Anthony Zinni, and finally, Secretary of State Powell and President Bush. Mr. Atallah remembers, "There [was] a 'West-Wing' hyperactivity to the work, and politics and law were always intertwined in ways that made both more complicated." He added, "The fact that we were living under conditions of a low-intensity conflict always made it difficult to separate personal concerns from legal ones."

Although finding his work with the Adam Smith Institute challenging, Mr. Atallah noted that he will not find it truly satisfying until the Arabs and Israelis make peace. He stated, however, that his work with the organization, Women for Women International, has brought him personal satisfaction through its work in improving the quality of life of thousands of women around the world.

Mr. Atallah has become a leading activist in the area of women's rights through Women for Women International, a non-

profit organization he co-founded with his wife, Zainab Salbi, in 1993.

Women for Women International began by linking American women and female survivors of violence in the Balkans, creating a source of financial assistance for the Bosnian and Croatian women through their American counterparts and furthering relationships through letter writing. With this support system in place, the organization developed programs to help the women achieve a level of financial independence through training in traditional and non-traditional jobs. Today, many of the Bosnian women who participate in discussions and workshops designed by Women for Women International are now familiar with the concept of women's human rights. Through discussion and training, they focus on women's roles in rebuilding society and the importance of political activism.

Often, women who take part in these human rights and training workshops become teachers themselves. Through lessons taught by women who have developed skills to respond to local problems, participants are better equipped to pinpoint the problems they want to address and the tools that they need to address them. As a last stage of empowerment, micro-credit loans are provided to assist women in becoming increasingly self-sufficient.

One example of the organization's success through sustainable development is the work of native Nigerian women to lessen the ill-effects of a long-standing Nigerian custom that greatly burdens the females who are subject to it. In parts of Nigeria, local custom subjects the wives of deceased males, to a series of punitive widowhood rites. These punishments may include a seven-day prohibition of

bathing, forced eating from a broken clay pot, mandatory stay in a room with the deceased husband's corpse, and forced departure from the woman's matrimonial home with her children. In response to these practices, Nigerian women participating in Women for Women's program have been instrumental in working with tribal elders to convince people to abandon the custom.

Women for Women International now operates centers in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Columbia, Iraq, Kosovo, Nigeria, and Rwanda. One of Women for Women International's chief goals is to pass on the responsibilities of directing the branch offices to native women within a year. The United Nations has commended the organization as a model for non-profit sustainability.

Mr. Atallah attributes much of his continued involvement in international law to WCL and the assistance of many professors and students who share his commitment to human rights issues. "For so many professors at WCL, these concerns permeated all the subject matter we were taught from international trade law to criminal law," Mr. Atallah remarked. Specifically, from Mr. Atallah's first day at WCL, the War Crimes Research Center, by providing assistance to the Prosecutor's Office of the International War Crimes Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, and the Human Rights Clinic captured his interest and imagination. "There are many ways an individual can make a difference in micro and macro issues, and WCL helped empower me more than anything else in my life to identify avenues in which to do so".

Emily Creighton is a J.D. candidate at the Washington College of Law and a staff writer for the Human Rights Brief.