Media Report

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Compiled by:

Rabinowitz / Dorf
Communications

Media Message Events

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Mainstream U.S. Print

Los Angeles Times

Egypt didn't catch Obama by surprise, official says
By Peter Nicholas
February 28, 2011
http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/sc-dc-obama-mideast-20110228,0,7294142.story?track=rss

President Obama had been preparing for possible unrest in the Middle East and North Africa since August, says Dennis Ross, a top foreign policy official. But the speed of Egypt's regime collapse was unexpected, he says.

WASHINGTON — A top White House foreign policy official rejected the notion that President Obama was caught flat-footed by the protests coursing through the Middle East, though he conceded that the speed with which old regimes collapsed came as a surprise.

Dennis Ross, a staff member on the National Security Council, told a conference hosted by the liberal pro-Israeli lobbying group known as J Street that the turmoil in Arab states illustrates that governments can no longer survive by repressing populations demanding change.

The Obama administration has been pressing this point since taking office, Ross said, telling Egyptian leaders they needed "to open their political system."

That didn't happen.

"Unfortunately, the Mubarak government chose not to heed those warnings, just as they did not recognize the magnitude of what was about to befall them," Ross said.

But he suggested the U.S. and even some of the protesters also didn't realize that Egypt's government was so vulnerable.

Ross said that "no one predicted the speed at which the revolution in Egypt occurred. Many of us who followed Egypt for years looked at the omnipresent nature of the security apparatus and the level of repression and assumed that in fact change could come, but it would only come gradually and not overnight. Many of the Egyptian activists themselves assumed that, also."

Since the fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian governments, Obama has faced widespread criticism that he ignored warnings that the old Arab dictatorships were increasingly unstable. In April of last year, a group of foreign-policy experts called the Egypt Working Group sent a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton cautioning that Egypt "faces substantial leadership changes in the near future without a fair and transparent political process." The letter went on to say that if "the opportunity for reform is missed, prospects for stability and prosperity in Egypt will be in doubt."

Michele Dunne, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who co-signed the letter, recalls bumping into a member of Obama's national security team at a dinner

party early in 2010, about a year before the Egypt crisis unfolded. The man looked at Dunne, who had been warning of turmoil in Egypt, and said, " 'Yes, yes, I know, Egypt. We should be paying more attention to Egypt,' " Dunne said. She declined to reveal his name.

But Ross, in his 40-minute address, said the Obama administration had been preparing for the unrest. In August, he said, the president signed a directive authorizing a government study on the political systems in the Middle East and North Africa. That set in motion a series of weekly meetings devoted to political reform in the region. Officials have looked into questions of where changes were attempted and whether any lessons "can be applied here," Ross said.

"President Obama recognized the magnitude of change that was taking place in Egypt very quickly," said Ross, a former Middle East envoy under ex-President Bill Clinton. "He observed early on that Egypt could not go back to the way that it was and the government had to take meaningful steps to immediately respond to legitimate demands of the protests. That is what we communicated to all of our contacts throughout the Egyptian administration, including directly to President Mubarak. That is not a conversation that began on Jan. 25" when the protests in Egypt started.

With the Obama administration searching for ways to end violence in Libya, Ross had harsh words for the country's leader, Moammar Kadafi.

He denounced "what can only be described as utterly appalling violence in Libya, where a detached, shameless and brutal leadership has chosen a desperate and irresponsible response to its people's legitimate demands."

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THE HILL

J Street begins conference, lobbying effort this weekend
By Alicia M. Cohn
February 26, 2011
http://thehill.com/business-a-lobbying/146263-j-street-begins-conference-lobbying-effort

The "pro-Israel, pro-peace" organization J Street begins its annual conference and lobbying effort this weekend following criticism by lawmakers and other pro-Israel groups over its support of a proposed UN Security Council resolution condemning Israeli housing development on the West Bank.

Under pressure from key members including Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) and Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), the Obama administration ultimately vetoed the resolution on Feb. 18.

No stranger to controversy since its founding in 2008 as a progressive Jewish political alternative to other, more conservative organizations, J Street typically takes heat over its self-definition as pro-Israel. J Street advocates a two-state solution for Israel and the Palestinians.

The nonprofit advocacy group holds its second conference in Washington starting Saturday evening and concluding with more than 200 meetings scheduled for attendees to lobby lawmakers on Capitol Hill on Tuesday. More than 2,000 people are already pre-registered for the event, according to spokeswoman Jessica Rosenblum, but last year around one-third of the attendees registered on-site.

"We think it's the third largest annual gathering of Jewish community [in the U.S.]," Rosenblum said. The other gatherings are the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference in May and the General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America in November.

The lineup of speakers at this year's J Street conference could again court controversy. It includes Imam Feisel Abdul Rauf, chairman of the Cordoba Initiative and originally the face of the Cordoba House — since renamed Park51 — which is the Muslim community center planned to be built a few blocks from Ground Zero in New York City. The location of the center, which includes a mosque, prompted protests by critics who considered it inappropriate to the memory of Sept. 11.

"[Rauf]'s work in New York is a very good example of efforts between the Muslim and Jewish communities to create interfaith cooperation and co-existence work," said J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami, who said he has not heard any renewed controversy over Rauf's inclusion.

Ambassador Maen Areikat, the chief representative of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to the U.S., will also speak. Six members of the Knesset, Israel's legislature, are included on the speakers list: Daniel Ben-Simon, Yoel Hasson, Shlomo Molla, Amir Peretz, Nachman Shai and Orit Zuaretz. All are members of the Kadima and Labor parties, while the leading party

Likud — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's party — is not represented. In contrast, Netanyahu spoke at last year's AIPAC conference in Washington and is scheduled to speak again this year.

The Obama administration is represented by Middle East adviser Ambassador Dennis Ross, who will deliver a keynote address at the event. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton spoke at last year's AIPAC convention.

Suhail Khan, a senior political appointee under President Bush, will also speak. Khan recently became the focal point of a controversy following his attendance at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), also in D.C., when conservative leader Frank Gaffney accused Khan of an intention to infiltrate the conservative movement due to alleged ties to the radical Islamic group Muslim Brotherhood. Khan and Lawrence Wilkerson, former chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell, represent the notable Republicans speaking at the event.

Lawmakers speaking at the event are all Democrats: Reps. Steve Cohen (Tenn.), Keith Ellison (Minn.), Betty McCollum (Minn.), David Price (N.C.), Jared Polis (Colo.), Lois Capps (Calif.) and Lynn Woolsey (Calif.).

Former J Street ally Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.) very publicly split from J Street last month in response to their stance on the UN resolution, saying, "America really does need a smart, credible, politically active organization that is as aggressively pro-peace as it is pro-Israel. Unfortunately, J-Street ain't it."

Ben-Ami called this a "misrepresentation of our position and of this resolution" and defended the resolution for stressing the urgency of achieving a two-state solution.

To that end, J Street's lobbying agenda this year will push for increased American leadership in promoting a two-state solution for Israel and the Palestinian territories and also for maintaining U.S. foreign aid to the region. Cutting foreign aid has been a topic under debate in recent budget decisions.

Hadar Susskind, vice president of policy and strategy for J Street, does not expect the UN resolution to come up in meetings on Capitol Hill.

"We are making a very explicit call about aid to Israel and aid to the Palestinian Authority," Susskind said. "Aid to the Palestinians, in fact aid to the rest of the region, is important to Israel as well. Talk to Israeli security officials, they will all tell you how important the U.S. funded and trained Palestinian security forces have been to reducing terrorist attacks in Israel."

Meetings with specific lawmakers are mainly dictated by the states represented by attendees, according to Susskind. Around 800 people are participating in the lobbying, he said, representing 35 states. The largest numbers of attendees come from New York, Massachusetts, Illinois, California
, Maryland and the D.C. area.
This story was updated at 4:30 p.m.

The New York Times

March 1 Updates on Libya's Revolt and Mideast Protests
By Robert Mackey
March 1, 2011
http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/01/latest-updates-on-libyas-revolt-and-mideast-protests-4/

Updated | 5:23 p.m. Speaking on Sunday to members of J Street, a Washington lobbying group established to support "the pro-Israel, pro-peace movement," Mona Eltahawy, an Egyptian journalist and blogger, said that the next peaceful revolution in the Arab world should be "for the freedom and dignity of Palestinians," who need liberation from both Israeli occupation and the autocratic regimes in the Palestinian territories.*

In her remarks, Ms. Eltahawy, who has been in the United States during the uprisings in the Arab world, said that the constant focus on how the events might affect Israel annoyed her, "because it wasn't about Israel. None of this has been about Israel. This has been all along about the freedom and dignity of people who for years have been suffocated and strangled by dictators supported by Israel and the U.S. administration, knowing full well that it was at the sacrifice of our freedom and dignity. And so, my initial reaction was, For once, it's not about you, be happy that it's not about you, stop being so narcissistic, it's about us, for a change."

Later she described the spirit of the uprisings as: "a beautiful non-violent revolution in which not one country's flag was burned, in which not one anti-Israeli or anti-American sentiment was expressed, because it was about Tunisia and it was about Egypt." She added: "It was wonderful, it had the best of Gandhi and Martin Luther King combined. That spirit, that spirit, now they're saying it's time to march for the freedom and dignity of our Palestinian sisters and brothers, and we will."

Ms. Eltahawy then urged the Jewish-American advocacy group to join Arabs in taking to the streets to march against the autocratic regimes in Gaza and the West Bank:

So my challenge to you is: make a call. Make a call as J Street, make a call as Israelis, and say: It's time for the revolution for the freedom and dignity of Palestinians. And if you make that call, I will be there, I will be marching with each and every single one of you, peacefully, nonviolently, for the freedom and dignity of Palestinians. It is about time, and it is something that everybody in the region is thinking about. It does not stop.

And this is not something that is supposed to scare you, this is something that you must reach out and embrace: non-violence. For the longest time we've been told Arabs are violent and they only understand the language of violence.

You have seen millions of Arabs who have peacefully dismantled a dictatorship in Egypt of 30 years a dictatorship in Tunisia of 23 years. Embrace them. Reach out to them and say, We salute your non-violence, we salute your freedom and dignity, and we too will march for the freedom

and dignity of Palestinians…. Call for that non-violent revolution for freedom and dignity of the Palestinians and I will be there.

On Tuesday, another Egyptian blogger and journalist, Hossam el-Hamalawy, took issue with the idea that the Egyptian uprising had nothing to do with Israel. In a post on his Arabawy blog, he argued:

The roots of this Egyptian revolt date back to September 2000, when street activism was revived again following a decade of dirty wary between the regime and the Islamist militants. There is a chain reaction linking those protests which broke out in solidarity with the Palestinian intifada to the current revolt.

Mr. El-Hamalawy then posted a link to this Flickr slide show of signs held up during the protests in Tahrir Square, many of which explicitly tied animosity for Hosni Mubarak and his vice president, Omar Suleiman, to their support for Israel (watch in full screen and click "Show Info" to see translations):

THE POLITICO

Dennis Ross warns Israel: Look at Egypt
By Laura Rozen
February 28, 2011
http://www.politico.com/blogs/laurarozen/0211/Dennis_Ross_warns_Israel_Egypt_shows_danger_of_clinging_to_unsustainable_status_quo.html?showall

White House Middle East and Iran adviser Dennis Ross urged Israel on Monday to recognize in the transformative events under way in the Middle East the case for why it would be a risky mistake to wait to make a permanent peace agreement with the Palestinians.

But Ross conceded, the Obama administration's Mideast peace-making efforts had already been severely frustrated when the Egyptian revolution erupted last month, and that Israel's early reaction to the regional unrest has been further risk-aversion rather than commitment to the peace effort. And Ross seemed to acknowledge that the U.S. administration has not yet determined how it will proceed if the current stalemate and intransigence persist.

"If Israel can view one lesson from the events in Egypt, it is the danger of getting stuck with an unsustainable status quo," Ross told the J-Street conference Monday. "Just as the frustrations in Egypt grew over time, we should all recognize that the conflict with the Palestinians will only become more intractable over time."

"Because there are a number [of] clocks that are ticking, the longer it takes to forge an agreement between Israelis and Palestinians, the harder it will be to forge a two-state solution that meets the needs of both sides," Ross said.

"The process that began in December had real problems," Ross said, referring to Washington abandoning an effort to get a new Israeli settlement freeze late last year and trying instead to advance the process through parallel sets of talks with the Israelis and Palestinians. "Again, we will make a judgment where the process is, where the two sides are, and what the most appropriate steps should be [that are] likely to have the best impact."

Ross defended the recent U.S. veto of a U.N. Security Council resolution that criticized Israeli settlement building, and critiqued Palestinian efforts to seek state recognition from countries around the world, saying that any durable peace settlement would have to be the result of negotiations between the two parties.

It was a point later critiqued by a panel of Middle East scholars.

"Is direct negotiations really the best way to approach this?" political economist and journalist Bernard Avishai asked the conference. "I think it's clear through five administrations -- going back to Reagan when there were 10,000 [Israeli] settlers and now there are a half million settlers across the Green Line -- that just relying on bilateral negotiations and the idea that it will

produce a settlement is misguided. The promise that they will produce a settlement is nil. And yet the product of any good faith negotiations is known."

"There is a great deal to gain to have the Obama administration give a political horizon to the parties," Avishai continued. "And the Obama administration does not have to win a diplomatic victory by getting the parties to immediately accept what the proposals are, but rather by organizing world opinion around those proposals."

"It would be a great pity if this new Middle East which is being born before our eyes were met by an old Israel," New York Times foreign affairs columnist Roger Cohen, recently back from Egypt's Tahrir Square, told the panel. "And my own view is that, contrary to the grim scenarios Prime Minister Netanyahu has evoked – in essence – 'watch out, this is not Europe 1989, this could well be Iran 1979,' … I think this is a hopeful development. …This is about Arabs trying to gain their institutions, rights, dignity and freedom."

"The core issue here is we have to somehow usher Israel from the defensive crouch it is in, from this siege mentality, which cannot see in this [regional democratic] movement a glimmer of possibility," Cohen continued. "We need leadership. ... Great leaders of history seize the moment."

"I don't think Obama is doing a bad job at the moment. But he needs to take it further," Cohen said, suggesting Obama go to Israel in May and give a speech to the Knesset.

THE POLITICO

Ross at J Street: 'Reform and peace go hand in hand'
By Ben Smith
February 28, 2011
http://www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/0211/Ross_at_J_Street_Reform_and_peace_go_hand_in_hand.html?showall

Obama aide Dennis Ross spoke this morning at the conference of J Street, the embattled liberal Israel group.

His presence, more than what he said, offered a real vote of confidence for the organization. He rebuffed a question, Jen Rubin writes, on the item on top of the wish list of the pro-Israel left: An American-imposed peace plan.

The Administration is now, he says, relying on the changes shaking the region to revive a collapsed peace process:

The ongoing wave of political change will finally enable the region to address the long-standing problem that political stagnation actually limited the prospects for comprehensive peace and regional reconciliation. The landmark 2002 Arab Human Development Report recognized that the lack of Arab-Israeli peace was "both a cause and an excuse for distorting the development agenda, disrupting national priorities and retarding political development." For these Arab scholars, Israel's occupation was used to "justify curbing dissent at a time when democratic transition requires greater pluralism in society and more public debate on national development policies. " As a peace negotiator, I heard countless times from leaders in the region that reform could not take place without peace. That was an excuse then; today, it is simply denial.

As governments begin to initiate reforms in response to the demands of their own citizens, they will soon realize that continued conflict will impede their efforts and national resources can be better applied to local concerns. In the early 1990s, Shimon Peres described a "New Middle East" where economic opportunities and interdependence would propel the region to a new era of cooperation and coexistence.

Two decades later, let us hope that the people of the Middle East will begin recognizing these opportunities, and that leaders will seize the moment to take necessary reforms not just to advance the cause of local reform, but also to advance the prospects for a comprehensive peace in the region. Reform and peace go hand in hand and offer the peoples of the region a future of hope and possibility.

Full transcript after the jump.

Remarks by Dennis Ross, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for the Central Region

J Street Conference 2011

Washington, DC
February 28, 2011
As Prepared for Delivery –

When J Street began planning this conference, I'm sure you had in mind discussing a very different reality in the Middle East than exists today. But a few months can feel like an eternity in the Middle East, and we have seen a remarkable transformation in the region over the last several weeks. For the first time in generations, people in Tunisia and then Egypt took to the streets and unseated their leaders through popular, peaceful protests. Thousands of people have followed them from Algeria to Bahrain to Yemen where we have seen governments begin to respond with different degrees of effectiveness. And we have also seen utterly appalling violence in Libya where a detached and brutal leadership has chosen a desperate and irresponsible response to its people's legitimate demands.

A few months ago, it was difficult to envision a Middle East without Ben Ali and Mubarak, stalwart representatives of an old order who governed with the belief that intimidation could preserve their rule. Now, as we enter a period of uncertainty, and seek to ensure that the transitions in Egypt and Tunisia are peaceful, orderly and credible, we need to begin thinking about the Middle East in new ways. As President Obama said a couple of weeks ago, "The world is changing; you have a young, vibrant generation within the Middle East that is looking for greater opportunity, and that if you are governing these countries, you've got to get out ahead of change. You can't be behind the curve."

This morning I would like to talk to you about what has happened in Egypt, its impact on the region, and the actions taken by the Obama Administration in the region and beyond.

One thing became very clear on January 25th when the first group of brave young Egyptian men and women descended on Tahrir Square: the status quo in Egypt was neither stable nor sustainable. For years, the Mubarak regime imposed its rule through a sprawling security apparatus operating under a three-decades-old Emergency Law.

But Egypt's revolution showed that repression alone cannot stifle dissent. That was the age-old tactic of the Mubarak regime: to arrest dissidents and activists; restrict the formation of political parties; and limit exposure to independent voices in the media. The parliamentary elections in November where the ruling National Democratic Party and associated independents won 95 percent of 500 seats was a clear indication of the regime's intention to disregard all suggestions to open political space. The problem, however, was that the frustrations of the Egyptian people were growing and were being infused with a new dynamism from Egypt's youth who have a profound yearning to join the 21st century. They want jobs, housing, and a future that offers opportunity. Unable to meet those needs and unwilling to satisfy the desire for openness, the Egyptian government fell back to what it knew best: coercion.

One case in particular exemplifies the fallacy of the old-fashioned thinking that dissident voices could simply be intimidated through force. Last June, a 28-year-old businessman was pulled out

of an internet café and beaten to death on the street by thugs from the security forces. His crime: posting examples of police corruption on a blog.

His name was Khalid Said, and within five days of his death, a Facebook page was created called, "We are All Khalid Said." Within weeks, 130,000 people joined the page, which now has almost half a million followers. And we now know that the page's founder was a young Google executive named Wael Ghonim, who himself became a powerful symbol of the opposition following his disappearance and detention for 12 days during the protests.

Many of us who have followed Egypt's problems for years, assumed the regime was simply too strong and repression was too pervasive for significant change to take place overnight. As my friend Hala Mustafa, the editor of the Egyptian journal, Democracy¸ warned in the Washington Post in 2005, "Unless the security services are reined in, real political change and efforts to implement 'reform from within' will continue to be blocked in Egypt and across the Middle East.

The enlightened political elite will remain powerless, individuals who can make genuine contributions will be systematically targeted, moderate groups and trends will continue to be excluded, and most citizens will remain absent from political life. In a word, the political arena will still echo only one voice." The irony, of course, is that when the political space is restricted to one voice, frustration is bound to deepen, and when it comes to the surface, it is more likely to boil over quickly.

The youth of the January 25th movement showed their countrymen how to overcome their fear and were soon joined by Egyptians of all walks of life who maintained a peaceful but persistent call for change. Not that long ago, as many of you may rememeber, Egyptians were seized by heightened sectarian tensions and attacks against the Christian minority. But the truly national movement that emerged in Tahrir Square witnessed both faiths, Muslim and Christian, praying together in an ultimate symbol of unity of purpose.

President Obama recognized the magnitude of change in Egypt very quickly. He stated early on that Egypt could not go back to the way it was and the government had to take meaningful and tangible steps immediately to respond to the legitimate demands of the protesters. That is what we communicated to our range of contacts within the Egyptian government including to President Mubarak directly. It is important to note that conversation did not begin on January 25th. Throughout our administration, we have stressed to the Egyptians the importance of opening the political system by taking tangible steps, such as lifting the Emergency Law and allowing international monitors to supervise last year's parliamentary elections. The Mubarak government chose not to heed these warnings, just as they did not realize the magnitude of the problem they faced on January 25th.

From the outset of Egypt's upheaval, we made clear that the United States cannot dictate how others run their societies, but we also emphasized our support for universal principles, including freedom of assembly, association, speech, and access to information.

We stressed all along that the demonstrations should be peaceful—and so should the

government's response. As the President stressed repeatedly, "We don't believe in violence and coercion as a way of maintaining control."

We encouraged inclusive negotiations between the government and a broad range of opposition and civil society figures, with the aim of supporting concrete reform and irreversible political change. We expressed the belief that the best way for the government to demonstrate its commitment to reform was for it to articulate a timetable and roadmap to the constitutional and political changes needed, and to lift the Emergency Law. We have sustained a broad outreach to a diverse range of nongovernmental and governmental actors in Egypt to encourage a negotiated transition and made it clear we support principles, processes, and institution-building – not personalities.

Now that Egypt enters a particularly delicate phase, we have committed to helping in any way we can. Specifically, we reassigned $150 million in assistance to support Egypt's democratic transition and aid in its economic recovery. Despite the extraordinary budget difficulties facing our country, now is not the time to cut aid to Egypt. The stakes are simply too high. Egypt has long been a symbolic and practical leader of the Middle East. The region looks to Egypt and will continue to do so now more than ever as other people from Algeria to Yemen seek to assert their own rights, and other governments determine how to respond to growing citizen demands. If Egypt's transition succeeds in establishing a truly representative and responsible government, it will establish a positive model for others and it will affect the whole Middle East.

While we have been encouraged by its initial steps, Egypt, as the President has said, is just at the beginning of its transition. We have applauded the military's professionalism and performance during the protests, choosing to safeguard the population at a time of great uncertainty. The Egyptian military has been a source of stability throughout this period, but it now has an enormous responsibility for which there are no courses in military academies: to supervise an orderly, safe, and credible transition back to civilian rule. The military has committed itself to undertaking such a transition, and we maintain excellent contacts with the military with whom our own armed forces have worked so closely for several decades. We are also encouraged that in two of their early communiqués, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces reaffirmed its commitment to abide by all regional and international treaties, including its peace with Israel.

Maintaining that position will be critical for Egypt's continued responsible leadership in the region and beyond—and that responsible, leading role is something we all clearly want to see.

As I said earlier, the challenges facing Egypt are not unique. Over the last few weeks, demonstrations have occurred in Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Libya, Morocco, Yemen, and, also Iran. Each of these countries has particular circumstances, but if there is one lesson these governments should take away from Hosni Mubarak's final days in office, it ought to be that repression does not pay. That is why a smarter path for each and every government in the region to pursue is one of open, transparent, and credible reform to establish new, more legitimate contracts between governments and populations. So far, we have seen initial positive steps in some places. The King and Crown Prince of Bahrain have pursued a national dialogue initiative with the full spectrum of Bahraini society – an effort we strongly support. This week, Algeria lifted its Emergency Law that had been in place for 19 years, a step President Obama commended. These

are important moves, but they are only just the beginning. Each and every government across the Middle East has a responsibility to its citizens to take serious and credible steps toward reform, and to uphold the universal rights of freedom of expression, association, and assembly. Those who have directed or encouraged violence must stop immediately. As the President told Chanceller Merkel of Germany over the weekend, "When a leader's only means of staying in power is to use mass violence against his own people, he has lost the legitimacy to rule and needs to do what is right for his country by leaving now.

We have been looking closely at these challenges across the region for some time. In fact, last August, the President signed a directive seeking a government-wide study on political reform in the Middle East and North Africa. For several months, we held weekly interagency meetings examining questions of political reform across the region, looking at past efforts at reform in the region, assessing the lessons from other areas, and considering different kinds of options and approaches. That preparation and process has helped us respond quickly and effectively to the events of the past month, and will help guide our regional focus on encouraging governments in the region to take on meaningful political reforms going forward.

While the challenges of governance and reform are certainly foremost on our minds given the dramatic events of the past few weeks, I want to emphasize that we have not lost track of our core priorities across the region: maintaining our strong security partnerships, actively pursuing peace between Israel and its neighbors, and keeping the pressure on Iran. Throughout the crisis in Egypt, we had close and ongoing consultations with our regional partners to share our assessments of the situation, explain our policies, and assure them of our continued commitments to their security. In the past weeks, the President, the Vice President, the Secretary of State and many others on the national security team have spoken multiple times to key leaders throughout the region. This week, Admiral Mullen, General Mattis, and senior state department officials have been in the Middle East. And we are working as intensively with our partners in Europe to develop an effective assistance plan to help Egypt and Tunisia. We have also been working closely with the Europeans and others on the steps that we unilaterally and collectively can take to respond to the crisis in Libya by conveying a unified international voice about the atrocities there and providing necessary humanitarian assistance. That unity of purpose was reflected in the unanimous passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1970 on Saturday night - a Chapter VII resolution that strongly condemns the crimes of the Libyan regime, and imposes an arms embargo and economic sanctions. It was also the first time in history where there was unanimous support for referring the investigation of such crimes to the International Criminal Court.

During this period we have also stayed in close touch with the Israelis. We understand well that while change in Egypt is a source of concern for many in the region, for Israel, it has profound meaning. Historically, Egypt broke the circle of isolation and denial of Israel. Peace - even cold peace - with Egypt has fundamentally altered the prospect for wider wars in the Middle East. Understandably, many Israelis worried about the meaning of change and wondered whether it might not be better to hold onto the old order. But as events unfolded, and the problems that Mubarak's regime had created became more apparent, many Israelis also came to see that the longer those problems festered, the more the extremists would benefit. That is the last thing that we want to see.

In this context and in this environment, it is also important to reaffirm a fundamental principle of the Obama administration's policy toward the region: our unshakeable commitment to Israel's security. Despite all the budgetary challenges, we have protected support for Israel and maintained full funding of the Iron Dome anti-rocket system that will significantly enhance Israel's defenses against short-range rockets and mortars. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mullen recently traveled to Israel to attend the farewell ceremony for outgoing IDF Chief of Staff Ashkenazi, symbolizing the close relations of the very top echelons of our militaries. Our ongoing strategic discussions with the Israelis have taken on a character, a range of issues, intensity, and a frequency that is simply unprecedented. This is important not just because these steps demonstrate our commitment to our long-standing ally, but because a strong and confident Israel is one that can take the risks necessary for peace—particularly during a time of great transition in the region.

If Israel can view one lesson from the events in Egypt, it is the danger of getting stuck with an unsustainable status quo. Just as the frustrations in Egypt grew over time, we should all recognize that the conflict with the Palestinians will only become more intractable over time.

Our efforts to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace are ongoing, even when they are less visible.

Next week, they will continue with meetings between representatives of the Quartet and Israeli and Palestinian negotiators. I am not going to talk at length about these efforts, but I would like to make two broad points.

First, because there are a number clocks that are ticking, the longer it takes to forge an agreement between Israelis and Palestinians, the harder it will be to forge a two-state solution that meets the needs of both sides. For example, the demographic clock is ticking and it is only a matter of time before it challenges the very foundations of the Zionist dream of a Jewish and democratic state.

The biological clock is ticking, and as a younger generation grows up with conflict and occupation and fading prospects for peace, the less likely we will be to see new leaders emerge who believe in coexistence. And as the struggle between rejectionists and pragmatists continues across the region, there is a technological clock that will empower those committed to violence with increasingly deadly and indiscriminate weapons of terror that can spoil peace at any moment. Hamas and Hezbollah had fewer rockets with shorter ranges just a few years ago; no doubt a few years from now, their arsenals will be even more dangerous and deadly if left unchecked. Peace is therefore essential to fulfilling the national aspirations of both peoples; the longer it is deferred, the more elusive it will become. We will continue to press both sides to engage seriously in negotiations – the only forum and the only mechanism that can resolve this historic conflict. We will also continue our assistance to the Palestinians institutional development program under President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad, which is essential to realizing a two-state solution with a viable state of Palestine. Indeed, Fayyad's reform and development plan anticipated how Arab governments can be more responsive to the needs of their citizens by providing better governance and personal security.

This brings me to my second point. The ongoing wave of political change will finally enable the region to address the long-standing problem that political stagnation actually limited the

prospects for comprehensive peace and regional reconciliation. The landmark 2002 Arab Human Development Report recognized that the lack of Arab-Israeli peace was "both a cause and an excuse for distorting the development agenda, disrupting national priorities and retarding political development." For these Arab scholars, Israel's occupation was used to "justify curbing dissent at a time when democratic transition requires greater pluralism in society and more public debate on national development policies. " As a peace negotiator, I heard countless times from leaders in the region that reform could not take place without peace. That was an excuse then; today, it is simply denial. As governments begin to initiate reforms in response to the demands of their own citizens, they will soon realize that continued conflict will impede their efforts and national resources can be better applied to local concerns. In the early 1990s, Shimon Peres described a "New Middle East" where economic opportunities and interdependence would propel the region to a new era of cooperation and coexistence.

Two decades later, let us hope that the people of the Middle East will begin recognizing these opportunities, and that leaders will seize the moment to take necessary reforms not just to advance the cause of local reform, but also to advance the prospects for a comprehensive peace in the region. Reform and peace go hand in hand and offer the peoples of the region a future of hope and possibility.

Let me close with a few words about Iran. Many of you probably noticed that the Iranian regime has tried to claim credit for the events in Egypt, but we know two things: first, that their claims fell on deaf ears in Egypt where a nation rose up seeking only to improve their own lives under national – not sectarian - ideals; and second, Iran's claims fell on deaf ears to many Iranians who once again took to the streets this week in an open act of defiance against their government.

Indeed, Iran has only exposed its own hypocrisy. As the President Obama said, "I find it ironic that you've got the Iranian regime pretending to celebrate what happened in Egypt when, in fact, they have acted in direct contrast to what happened in Egypt by gunning down and beating people were who trying to express themselves peacefully." And following Iran's continued suppression of peaceful dissent, Secretary Clinton said that "It has been made clear to the world that Iran denies its citizens the same fundamental rights it continues to applaud elsewhere in the Middle East." We support the universal rights of people to express themselves freely and peacefully - the very rights Iran denied in June 2009 and again these past weeks. We will continue to speak up on behalf of those rights when they are so brazenly denied.

In the meantime, we are keeping our eye on the ball with Iran. We will keep the pressure on and we will increase it with our partners as Iran continues to face serious hardships as a result of international sanctions. Over the past two weeks, the United States has designated an additional Iranian bank for supporting prohibited proliferation activities and imposed sanctions on two Iranian officials for human rights abuses. While the door will always remain open for diplomacy, Iran must know that delay tactics and obfuscations will only lead to more pressure. Iran's continued unwillingness to engage seriously with the P5+1 and its continued failure to respond fully to inquiries by the IAEA will only add to that pressure. Let me be very clear about one thing: we are determined to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and we will not be deflected from that goal.

We clearly have a full plate of challenges in the Middle East today. But our agenda is clear: help Egypt to conduct a successful, orderly, and credible transition; encourage others in the region to undertake meaningful reform now before they too face destabilizing unrest; continue the push for peace between Israelis, Palestinians, and their Arab neighbors; and build the pressure on Iran.

This is a complex and demanding agenda, but it has the complete attention of the President and his full national security team.

Thank you very much.

The Boston Globe

Older Jews, younger Jews, and Israel
By Jesse Singal
March 16, 2011
http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/blogs/the_angle/2011/03/older_jews_youn.html

My column yesterday on the changing face of American Jewish attitudes toward Israel elicited some responses from older Jews arguing that I overstated the extent to which there's an age divide when it comes to the question of criticizing Israel and supporting Palestinian rights. For example, one woman from Cambridge wrote me to say, "it isn't only the young that support J Street and Palestinian rights with a 2 state solution. We are very senior citizens who support the views of J Street."

Looking back at the column, I think this is a fair criticism, and while there is an age divide (see the voluminous work of Steven Cohen for more information on this), I didn't mean to imply that it was impermeably strong, or that young Jews are the only ones attracted to J-Street-style discourse.

For what it's worth, when I went down to Washington the J Street conference, the crowd was probably divided 50/50 between college students and folks who were middle-aged or older. This is partially a function of the fact that older people are more likely to have the flexible schedules and finances to travel to a conference — though J Street did seem to give out a lot of money to college students who wanted to attend, which would push things in the other direction — but I was still struck by some of the conversations I had with older attendees.

Many seemed to have been brought back into the national-level discussion over Israel by J-Street. While they participated in liberal politics — many were active in the anti-Iraq-War movement, for example — the sense I got was that until J Street arose, their involvement in Israel issues was more confined to the local and small-bore. So it's not that J Street is providing anything approaching a new message on Israel — it's that the organization is filling the pent-up demand for a national forum for folks who already held those views to air, discuss, and debate them. And it's not just young Jews who are doing so.

Broadcast Media

C-SPAN2

Middle East Peace
February 28, 2011
http://www.c-spanarchives.org/program/MiddleEastPeace10

Five members of the House of Representatives talked about the Middle East Process and the impact of the current unrest in the region on talks between the Israelis and Palestinians.

U.S. Jewish Print

THE JEWISH DAILY FORWARD

At J Street Conference, Israeli Politicians Are Scarce
By Nathan Guttman
February 27, 2011
http://www.forward.com/articles/135709/

Disagreement Over U.N. Resolution Has Soured Relations Between the Lobby and the Jewish State

Washington — Although relations between J Street and the Israeli government had thawed in the past year, the group's recent refusal to denounce a U.N. resolution condemning Israel's settlement policy has soured relations once again.

J Street's second annual conference is, therefore, taking place without any official representatives of the Israeli government in attendance.

For the second year in a row, Michael Oren, the Israeli ambassador to the U.S., turned down J Street's invitation to speak at the conference. And the embassy, which sent a low-level diplomat to the inaugural meeting, pulled out its participation altogether this year, citing the group's statement on the U.N. resolution as the reason.

Hadar Susskind, J Street's vice president of policy and strategy, said on Sunday that relations with Israeli officials had improved in the past year and included private discussions with Oren and the embassy staff, and meetings between by J Street delegations and Israeli officials in Jerusalem.

But all that was reversed in recent weeks, as attendance at the J Street conference proved to be a thorny issue for Israeli politicians, as well. Five members of Knesset are attending the conference, four from Kadima, Israel's largest opposition party, and one from the Labor Party that has recently dropped out of the Netanyahu coalition government.

The Kadima officials were publicly chastised by members of their party who argued that participation in the Washington event would be seen as backing a group that is not supportive of Israel. Orit Zuaretz, a member of Knesset, revealed in a plenary discussion that J Street's opponents phoned all 80,000 Kadima registered members, urging them to pressure her and her colleagues not to attend the meeting. Another legislator, Nachman Shai said in a Sunday panel discussion that since entering politics he had never received so many pleas as he did from those calling on him not to attend the J Street conference.

Expressing her support from afar was Israel's opposition leader Tzipi Livni, Kadima's leader. "The discussion within the pro-Israel community about how best to advance this goal should be based on respecting different opinions that are motivated by love and commitment to Israel's security and its future," Livni wrote in a letter to J Street leaders which was handed out to

participants. By issuing the letter, Livni broke with the government's boycott of J Street but she still stopped short of fully endorsing the group. "I know that in her heart she is with us," said Shai. He added that that Livni also has to keep in mind her political ambition of becoming prime minister. "Tzipi has to make her own considerations," Shai said, reminding the audience that she "is from the center, not from the left."

Some of those Israeli politicians who did speak in Washington did not mince words. Daniel Ben-Simon, a Knesset member from the Labor party, expressed his doubts regarding the significance of the de-legitimization campaign against Israel. "I tend to not trust the honesty of some politicians in Israel when they say that the main enemy [of Israel] is some people who don't accept us," he said. Ben-Simon argued that criticism of Israel is, to a certain extent, a result of Israeli policies and that Israel needs not to fear such criticism. "We are a superpower," he said, "We are not in Warsaw ghetto." The Labor legislator accused those claiming Israel is under attack of adhering to "paranoia of right-wing politics headed by Netanyahu."

Two other Kadima Knesset members, Yoel Hasson and Shlomo Molla, also harshly criticized the Netanyahu administration and praised the Palestinian government headed by Mahmoud Abbas and Salam Fayyad, arguing that it represents the best chance for peace in the region.
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THE JEWISH DAILY FORWARD

J Street Opens With 2,000 Participants, Still Struggles To Define Itself
By Nathan Guttman
February 27, 2011
http://www.forward.com/articles/135708/

Washington — The three-day J Street conference that opened in Washington on Saturday night was the group's largest gathering so far and underscored the dovish, pro-Israel lobby's fast growth since its inception less than three years ago. But it also provided a glimpse into J Street's ongoing struggle to define itself.

This message was delivered forcefully in the opening speech by Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center. While declaring himself "among J Street's most fervent fans," Saperstein did not shy away from highlighting his worry about J Street's recent attempt to block an American veto of a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Israel's settlement policy.

"The recent decision to oppose the veto raises concerns," Saperstein said, arguing that it put the lobby's supporters "in a difficult position" and could cause J Street problems in the long run. "If you alienate your mainstream support you risk losing everything," he said, explaining that if J Street leaned too heavily to the left, it could lose its clout within the political system.

Jeremy Ben-Ami, J Street's executive director, said the lobby's support of Israel was a core value. "We are passionately and unapologetically pro-Israel," Ben-Ami said in a pointed statement aimed at critics who have argued that the lobby cannot be defined as a pro-Israel group.

But Ben-Ami also made clear the lobby believes it can and should speak out against the policies of the Israeli government led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Ben-Ami also took issue with members of the organized Jewish community for what he described as their belief that Israel can do no wrong and their refusal to publicly debate J Street.

The group honored three individuals on its opening night. Chosen were columnist Peter Beinart, who stirred a debate in the Jewish world with his article questioning the community's commitment to liberal values as they relate to Israel; Sara Benninga, an Israeli activist from the Shiekh Jarrah solidarity movement, and Dr. Izzeldin Abulaish, a physician from Gaza who lost three daughters in an Israeli raid during Operation Cast Lead.

Benninga, who represents the left end of J Street's "big tent" policy, won big applause for her remarks. She described actions by the Israeli government as "ethnic discrimination" against Arabs living in East Jerusalem, and argued that Israel "shamelessly delegitimizes sections of its own citizenry."

In an emotional presentation, Dr. Abulaish said he "would love, for a few seconds, if [his] daughters would come out of their grave and see that their blood was not wasted."

But beyond the plenary speeches and the panel discussions, Washington conferences are measured by the number of participants, and in the case of the dovish lobby, by a comparison to its centrist rival, AIPAC.

J Street organizers said the conference this year had attracted a record 2,000 participants, an increase over the more than the 1,500 that last year attended the group's inaugural conference. But this year's record attendance is still a far cry from AIPAC's 6,000 plus members who attend their conferences annually.

J Street chose to hold its parley this year in the Washington Convention Center, a huge downtown complex that annually houses the AIPAC's conferences. But while the more established pro-Israel lobby easily occupies the entire building, J Street's conference took up only one floor of meeting rooms.

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THE JEWISH DAILY FORWARD

Middle East Peace Still a U.S. Priority, Ross Tells J Street
By Nathan Guttman
February 28, 2011
http://forward.com/articles/135735/

Washington — The Middle East's current upheavals make it clear that moving forward on peace between Israel and the Palestinians is more, not less urgent than ever before, President Obama's point man on the Middle East told conferees attending J Street's annual Washington conference.

But Dennis Ross, the president's closest advisor on issues related to Israel, declined to say when, or whether, Obama would roll out an administration proposal for bridging the gaps that have so far stymied any movement on the Israeli-Palestinian peace front for several years.

Still, Ross made clear that despite the rapidly changing landscape in the region, the U.S. wishes to promote a peace accord between Israelis and Palestinians. Drawing a line connecting the recent uprising in Egypt to the stalemate in the peace process, Ross said, "If Israel can view one lesson from the events in Egypt, it is the danger of getting stuck with an unsustainable status quo."

In the course of his speech, Ross detailed the administration's updated list of priorities for the Middle East and put support for Egypt in its transition and the demand for reform in other Arab regimes at the top of the list.

But Ross also conveyed a sense of urgency for promoting peace in the region, and stressed that "the conflict doesn't become easier to solve over time." Among the reasons he listed for moving forward with the peace process was a factor Ross described as "the biological clock" which is bringing to the region younger leaders to replace the old guard. This young generation taking over the region, Ross argued, needs to see that peace is a real possibility in the Middle East.

At the same time, Ross expressed an understanding of Israel's concerns in facing the changing reality in the Middle East. "In this context and in the environment of uncertainty," said Ross, it is important to reaffirm the administration's "unshakable commitment to Israel's security."
Ross refused to go into the details of the U.S. plans for brokering peace in the Middle East and would not say if it was time for the Obama administration to role out its own peace plan.

The speech delivered by the president's adviser on Middle East was carefully worded and did not include any reference to the hosting group – J Street. Last year, the administration sent James Jones, who was then Obama's National Security Advisor, to speak at the conference. Jones, who received warm applause from the crowd, praised J Street's work and pledged that the administration would make sure to send a representative to future J Street meetings. This year, Ross did not mention J Street in his speech and did not repeat the promise given by Jones last year.

THE JEWISH DAILY FORWARD

Rather Than Defend Obama, J Street Is Now Pushing Him
By Nathan Guttman
March 2, 2011
http://www.forward.com/articles/135838/#ixzz1FfBHOqk7

Washington — Shifting sands in the Middle East and new political realities in Washington are forcing J Street to recalibrate its strategy.

The dovish Israel lobby, whose supporters gathered recently in Washington for its second national conference, had previously tried to provide political cover for President Obama as he pushed for a speedy resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But now J Street finds itself prodding a reluctant administration to take a more assertive approach.

"We were the blocking-back, clearing space for the quarterback to do what we wanted him to do," said J Street's president, Jeremy Ben-Ami, using a football analogy in an interview with the Forward. But, Ben-Ami added, Obama "hasn't been able to push as aggressively as we would like," and J Street has "switched from being out front and clearing the way, to pushing him to do something more."

Speakers at J Street's conference, which took place from February 26 to March 1, sought to inject a sense of urgency to the task of resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Among the many speakers making this case was Egyptian-born journalist and activist Mona Eltahawy, who won lengthy applause from the crowd. She stressed that Arabs who have risen up against their regimes will not be favorably disposed toward Israel if it does not resolve its conflict with the Palestinians.

"The hatred to Israel will not end," she warned, until Israel starts treating Palestinians as "human beings who deserve freedom and dignity."

But while the J Street audience warmly embraced this message, the hall fell mostly silent when Obama's senior Middle East adviser, Dennis Ross, outlined the administration's agenda for the region. Ross mentioned the Israeli-Palestinian conflict third in a list of Middle East policy priorities, after he discussed helping Egypt transition to democracy and promoting reforms in other Arab countries.

Ross made clear that the administration still wishes to address the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and warned that the lesson from the fall of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak is "the danger of getting stuck with an unsustainable status quo."

But when pressed by the moderator on the possibility of the United States making bridging proposals or outlining its own peace plan, Ross replied that the situation is not ripe for such a move.

“The process hasn’t played out yet,” he said, adding that the administration is currently focusing on its talks with each of the two parties.

This stance clashes with the official position of J Street, which advocates presenting an American plan outlining what an eventual peace accord would look like. J Street broke with the administration on this issue in December after it became clear that despite the failure of efforts to restart peace talks, Obama is not ready to put forward such an American plan.

While J Street has moved from a supporting role to aggressively pushing the administration for action, on Capitol Hill the group is still focused on creating political space for lawmakers who wish to depart from the Jewish establishment’s line on Israel.

J Street’s gala dinner on February 28 provided an opportunity to showcase the group’s congressional support. Conference organizers say that more than 50 members of Congress were in attendance, a good turnout for a young organization, although significantly fewer than the numbers seen at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee’s annual national conference, where more than half of Congress attends the dinner. J Street did land a noteworthy surprise guest in Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who introduced the evening’s honoree, Kathleen Peratis, a Manhattan lawyer who is also a member of the Forward Association’s board of directors.

Some members of Congress who participated in J Street’s conference spoke of the difficulties of embracing J Street’s agenda on Capitol Hill.

During one panel discussion, Rep. Keith Ellison, a Minnesota Democrat, said that “there are prices to pay” for supporting J Street’s views in Congress. In another discussion, Rep. Lynn Woolsey, a California Democrat, argued that on Middle East issues the “most important decisions are governed by fear, fear of losing votes, of losing campaign donations.” But Rep. Lois Capps, another California Democrat who is endorsed by J StreetPAC, said that there is a “noticeable change” in Congress and more openness to listening to other views on Israel. However, lawmakers participating in the J Street conference — even those who received financial support from the group’s PAC — seemed reluctant to push Obama for a more aggressive American role in the peace process.

“President Obama has been a leader in trying to bring both sides to the table, and we wish the president success,” Rep. Jared Polis, a Colorado Democrat, told the Forward. Rep. David Price, a North Carolina Democrat, seemed more open to the idea of presenting an American peace plan, although he did not see such a move as imminent. “The time may come” to take such a step, Price said.

While sailing has not always been smooth on the political front, J Street’s conference demonstrated the group’s success in cultivating enthusiastic grassroots support, particularly on college campuses. According to J Street, 500 of the 2,300 participants in its conference were college students.

But in addition to showcasing J Street's grassroots following, the conference also highlighted some challenges facing the 3-year-old organization. In particular, J Street faces a sometimes difficult balancing act in appealing to those in Washington and in the organized Jewish community while also meeting the expectations of the left-leaning activists who make up its base.

A meeting room hosting a discussion on the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement was overflowing with students and young activists eager to debate the issue. While J Street is officially opposed to BDS, it is more willing to entertain debate on the topic than are most mainstream Jewish groups, which see the BDS movement as a dangerous effort to delegitimize Israel.

"The BDS movement has a lot of things that it does that I don't agree with, but it's something you can't ignore when talking about the political discussion," said conference attendee Alon Mazor, a student at the University of California, Berkeley.

J Street came under fire from critics for including a BDS defender, Rebecca Vilkomerson, executive director of Jewish Voice for Peace, on the panel.
Another topic of debate at the conference was J Street's recent statement urging the Obama administration not to veto a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlement activity. The Obama administration ultimately decided to veto the resolution, and J Street's stance led to a public fight with one influential member of Congress who had previously been endorsed by its PAC — Rep. Gary Ackerman, a New York Democrat — and soured the group's already strained relations with the Israeli government.

Rabbi David Saperstein, the longtime director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and a leading voice of the Jewish community's liberal wing in Washington, delivered a friendly warning on this issue in his opening address at the start of the conference.

"The recent decision to oppose the veto raises concerns," said Saperstein, arguing that it put J Street's supporters "in a difficult position." He said that if the group leaned too heavily to the left, it could lose its clout within the political system. "If you alienate your mainstream support you risk losing everything," he said.

Ben-Ami, for his part, stood by J Street's stance on the Security Council resolution, as well as its "big tent" policy. Asked by a reporter where he sees himself in this tent, Ben-Ami responded: "I'm the pole right in the middle holding the tent up."

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BALTIMORE JewishTimes

Intersecting With J Street
By Neil Rubin
March 1, 2011
http://blogs.jewishtimes.com/index.php/jewishtimes/neilrubin/intersecting_with_j_street/

Why has J Street struck such a chord – for some happy and for others cursed – in so many people? Earlier this week, I went to Washington, D.C. to attend part of the 2,000 delegate national convention for the not-quite three-year-old lobby that bills itself as "pro-Israel and pro-peace." (Check it out at http://www.jstreet.org).

For the most part, I found people who deeply care for Israel but do so along liberal lines. That is, they voice out loud what many American Jews I know say privately: We love Israel but we surely don't love its actions of West Bank/East Jerusalem settlement building, policies of demolitions of homes of families of Arab terrorists and even the need to maintain a "united, eternal, undivided Jewish capital of Jerusalem."

Of course, I know plenty of other Jews who agree with the "we love Israel" part but whose concerns are "If we let down our guard, the Arabs will try to overrun the Jewish state, which, after all, they have repeatedly tried to do and keep saying they want to do."

Frankly put, the public talk at J Street is anathema at an AIPAC convention, the large and very successful pro-Israel lobbying group (http://www.aipac.org).

Mind you, in my view J Street has not always been its own best friend. In its less than three years, it has done real damage to its public standing with a swathe of American Jewish centrists such as myself. For example, it has: been far too late in condemning the clear Iranian nuclear aspirations; not initially admitted it receives funding from the controversial benefactor George Soros; and supported a U.N. resolution that condemned Israeli settlements but did not mention Palestinian terrorism.

In some groups that would rightly command a change in leadership, but J Street's board has decided to stick with its very talented head, Jeremy Ben-Ami. That's their choice and I respect his intellect and his talents.

Also, it's for those mentioned reasons that the Israeli embassy declined to send any representative to the J Street conference, while noting that it is in a dialogue with J Street officials. That was a huge mistake. When we Jews are at our best, we talk to one another about our differences.

It's flat out wrong for the Israeli government to not openly meet with American Jews who may have different policy views, but whom express their strong support for a strong, democratic Jewish state – a line that gained robust applause when Ambassador Dennis Ross spoke to the

group. After all, the J Street advocates are only saying what, depending on the year, between 45 to 55 percent or so of the Israeli public is saying.

That said, perhaps we in the alleged mainstream of Jewish life should look at J Street with a different eye – that of a vehicle to promote responsible Jewish identity. That's exactly what I told some representatives of the national office and a local activist when I had lunch with them in Baltimore last spring.

"You guys might not realize it," I told them, "but you have a deep responsibility toward American Jews. The way I see it, your job is to reach out to Jews on the left and the far-left – where there undeniably are anti-Semites – and give them a Jewish organization to feel comfortable in. You guys can really help someone with their Jewish identity."

I stand by that even more today. And the good thing is I saw people with good Jewish identities of many ages, particularly young adults. I saw some men and women with kippot, and I saw smiling college students and aging veterans of the Jewish peace movement bantering in the hallways and sessions.

They have, in J Street, found a voice. Now I may not agree (and do not) with all of their general stands, but I have something in common with them. I love being Jewish and I love Israel, and I'm not afraid to discuss all types of versions of what that means in a world of increasingly porous identity boundaries. And the rest of us need to open to that conversation as well.

Baltimore Jewish Times

From Baltimore To 'J Street'
By Neil Rubin
March 4, 2011
http://www.jewishtimes.com/index.php/jewishtimes/news/jt/local_news/from_baltimore_to_j_street/

At age 27, Rich Goldman neatly fits the profile of whom J Street — the pro-Israel, pro-peace lobby that has raised the ire of the established pro-Israel community — says represents large swathes of American Jews.

"Yes, this is resonating with a younger generation, but with my generation you don't confine yourself to one group. I can support J Street and AIPAC," he said, the second group being among the country's most effective lobbies but which will not work with J Street.

"AIPAC and J Street are not necessarily diametrically opposed, but there are a lot of people at J Street who feel their voices aren't heard, that they can't talk about Israel in a loving way and say that they want Israel to be a Jewish, democratic state, but when we look at what Israel is doing today, we don't see that," said Mr. Goldman, a doctoral student in information systems at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County.

Sitting on a couch in the hallway of the Washington Convention Center, he had just come out of a conference session called "What About Hamas?," one of about two dozen workshops and plenary sessions that some 2,000 like-minded activists from across the country attended Feb. 26-March 1 at J Street's annual convention.

Throughout their three days in the nation's capital — which on Tuesday saw Capitol Hill lobbying of hometown representatives — the delegates heard from largely sympathetic voices, including the Obama administration's Amb. Dennis Ross, Rep. Steven Cohen (D-Tenn.) and Rep. Keith Ellison (D-Minn.). Likewise, they were addressed by a seemingly who's who of primarily left-of-center and liberal Jewish activists and academics.

The Israeli embassy refused to send someone, reflecting its ongoing concern that J Street — with whose representatives it says it remains in a dialogue — takes positions contrary to that of its government. In the past, J Street was slow to support a resolution condemning Iran's nuclear drive, supported a proposed U.N. resolution criticizing Israeli settlements and denied receiving large funding from the controversial liberal Jewish activist George Soros, who has been highly critical of Israel.

Yet, Knesset opposition members from the Kadima and Labor Parties were prominent. Likewise, the delegates' welcome packet included a greeting from Israeli President Shimon Peres, long an advocate of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "This meeting should serve as a reminder that Jewish life is an ongoing moral call, for us as a people, and to others a repeated call for peace," he wrote, reflecting the gathering's slogan of "Giving Voice to Our Values."

In large part, the event seemed a friendly gathering for liberal American Jewish groups, whose members often say they feel uncomfortable in a Jewish establishment that is increasingly intolerant of criticism of Israel. Indeed, lining the hallways outside of the session rooms were tables from operations such as Americans for Peace Now, Tikkun, Alliance for Middle East Peace and Rabbis for Human Rights.

At one table, the University of Maryland's J Street chapter — which this past weekend hosted a *Shabbaton* for about 75 local and visiting J Street students — sold shot glasses that were to be filled up to a thin "green line," a humorous reference to the hope of many attendees that Israel withdraw to its pre-1967 armistice line with Jordan.

Elana Mayer, a UM sophomore from Pikesville sitting at the UM J Street table, said she enjoyed being with like-minded people. "I was always a liberal activist and I see J Street as an opportunity to support Israel and love Israel as much as I do and still work for peace," she said.

Her campus J Street chapter meets weekly and often holds coffee chats in which members discuss topics such as the role of Judaism in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, environmental issues, and more, often inviting Palestinian, Israeli and other students.

Baltimore J Street activists are trying to tap into that activism in people of all ages. "We're here to support a safe, democratic Jewish state of Israel," said Aaron Levin, co-chair of the Baltimore J Street chapter and a science writer. "We want to support U.S. policies that advance all of the parties to move in that direction. A safe, secure, democratic Israel is only possible next door to and living in peace and security with a viable Palestinian state."

Of course, delegates and speakers expressed broadly varying ideas of how to get to that point. Indeed, a sense of realism and difficulty crept into the remarks of the most optimistic of speakers.

Take, for example, the comments of Daniel Levy, co-director of the Middle East Task Force at the New America Foundation, on one panel. "If Israel withdraws from the territories in a meaningful way, removes the system of controls, I think the Palestinians start to build their meaningful state," the Israel Defense Forces veteran and former Israeli Prime Minister's office staffer said.

But he added, "The removal of anxiety will only come when we're no longer denying another people their freedom, but I'm not suggesting next morning we disband the Israel Defense Forces. There's only so far I'm going to go with suggestions."

That's A Fact'

Amb. Dennis Ross, a key point person for the Obama administration on the Middle East, told delegates at the J Street convention that Washington must not cut ties with an Egypt in political flux, the protests in Arab countries would eventually aid Israel, and the Palestinians were wrong to press for unilateral statehood.

Defending the administration's response to the revolution in Egypt, he said, "No one predicted the speed in which the revolution in Egypt occurred. Many of us who followed Egypt for years and knew the level of the security apparatus and oppression assumed that change could come but slowly, not overnight."

Talk with Egypt's ousted president Hosni Mubarak on the need for reform, he said, began "from the very beginning of the administration, where we stressed repeatedly that the Egyptians needed to take steps to open their political system, where they needed to take steps to lift the emergency laws and allow for local elections."

Still, Mr. Ross said, "We kept by the principal that the United States would not dictate how others would run their societies but we also stressed universal principals such as including freedom of assembly, association, speech and access to information."

The administration, he said, has re-assigned $150 million in aid to Egypt for economic recovery and political transition. "Now is not the time to cut aid to Egypt," he said to strong applause.

"Our stake in Egypt is enormous. Egypt is important in both symbolic and practical importance in the area."

That said, the long-term "core priorities" for the United States in the region remain "actively pursuing peace between Israel and its neighbors and keeping the pressure on Iran."

Mr. Ross added, "As events unfolded and the problems that Mubarak's regime had created became more apparent, many Israelis also came to see that the longer those problems festered, the more the extremists would benefit. That is the last thing that we want to see."

Noting the administration's refusal to cut foreign aid to the Jewish state as well as its funding of the Iron Dome anti-missile project, Mr. Ross said, "I say this from the perspective of someone who has served in five administrations: There has never been a time when the security relationship between Israel and the United States has ever been stronger and that's a fact."

He did not mention any of the tensions between Washington and Jerusalem regarding the building of West Bank and East Jerusalem housing for Jews.

However, he cited "innumerable conversations" with Arab leaders while he was the Clinton White House's chief Israeli-Arab peace negotiator. "[They] talked about the importance of reform and they said, 'We cannot do that without peace.' That was an excuse then and it is undeniable today. Reform and peace go hand-in-hand."

Meanwhile, he added that Palestinian moves at the United Nations and elsewhere to gain support for an independent state without negotiations "aren't going to produce agreements unless unilateral moves are negotiated behind the scenes. It's clear that both sides have a set of needs and you are not going to make progress unless both are addressed."

— *N.R.*

CLEVELAND Jewish News

J Street promotes message of peace at conference
By Gabriel Weinstein
March 3, 2011
http://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/articles/2011/03/03/news/nation_and_world/doc4d6e82f90e013245343227.txt

Protests in the Arab world and their effects on Israel topped the agenda at J Street's second national conference in Washington, D.C., last week.

Delegations from J Street's local chapter and from Oberlin College spent four days attending lectures and panel discussions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, current events in the Arab world, American foreign policy and advocacy training.

Support for a pro-peace, two-state solution is missing from the Israeli-Palestinian peace dialogue at the local and national levels, says Cleveland Heights resident and J Street Cleveland chapter leader Alan Federman, 61. He also attended J Street's first national conference in 2009.

"I am here not only to learn and be inspired, but to a give voice to what I feel is a very common sentiment in the Jewish community," says Federman, a psychotherapist.

Debra Hirshberg, 56, a retired software consultant from Cleveland Heights and J Street Cleveland's advocacy director, came to tell members of Congress immediate actions must be taken to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

"We have to take action," says Hirshberg, one of six Clevelanders attending J Street. "I think influencing the United States Congress and the administration to be more engaged in this issue is a very important thing we can do as American Jews to create positive change for Israel and the Palestinians."

Hirshberg notes the group was scheduled to visit the offices of Reps. Marcia Fudge and Dennis Kucinich (both D-Ohio) and Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) on the conference's scheduled lobbying day.

Oberlin College students Ari Feinberg, 20, and Joe Brophy, 23, were two of the estimated 500 students from across the country attending the convention. Brophy, a senior and Jewish studies major from Beaverton, Ore., says he has long considered himself an "ally, friend, associate, buddy" of J Street but wants to deepen his understanding of the group's message.

"On our campus a lot of people don't know this narrative exists," Feinberg adds. "You're either pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli. And so I am hoping by working with J Street we can do a lot of work to get this narrative out on campus."

Feinberg, a first-year computer science major from Philadelphia, says he supports J Street's

message – that you can be both pro-Israel and most importantly, pro-peace.

Ohio University's Rabbi Danielle Leshaw, executive director of OU's Hillel, came with two students. Leshaw says the conference provided an opportunity for her students to sharpen their Israel advocacy skills and become more knowledgeable about the Israeli-Palestinian relationship.

"It will help our Israel dialogue grow into something perhaps deeper and more meaningful," says Leshaw, 39.

Cleveland-area chapter leaders said they hope attending the national J Street convention is the start of a busy year. The chapter formed in the winter of 2010 and hopes to expand its core membership group. Federman says 500 people have signed up for the group's listserv, and about 30 or 40 people usually attend the group's speakers and other educational programs.

The group members plan to hold a public meeting about their convention experiences within the next few weeks. J Street Cleveland hopes to bring J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami to Cleveland soon and to expand membership by partnering with young Jewish professionals and college students.

"We have the building blocks to put in place so there are ways for people to participate in J Street Cleveland," Hirshberg said. "We have to create those ways for someone who has two hours a week, two hours a month, or two hours a day to plug themselves in."

Gabriel Weinstein, a Shaker Heights High School graduate, is now a sophomore at Ohio University majoring in journalism. This semester he is interning with the Scripps Howard Foundation Wire in Washington, D.C.

J Street back on home turf - Confab a chance to regroup, strut
By Adam Kredo
March 2, 2011
http://washingtonjewishweek.com/main.asp?SectionID=4&SubSectionID=4&ArticleID=14481

Having been stuck in damage-control mode for months, J Street finally had a chance last week to hit the reset button, puff out its chest and go on the offensive.

The occasion was the organization's second national conference, a four-day event that drew nearly 2,300 supporters to the D.C. Convention Center. J Street founder Jeremy Ben-Ami used the opportunity to strike back at those who have accused the organization of being overly critical of the Jewish state.

"Make no mistake," he told the crowd last Saturday night, "we are passionately and unapologetically pro-Israel." Recurring assaults on J Street's reputation, he added, are "nothing we cannot handle."

Indeed, the upstart organization has been buffeted repeatedly by flak storms since its first national conference. From the revelation that it had lied about its relationship with billionaire George Soros to its messy breakup with a prominent member of Congress, the pro-Israel, pro-peace group has spent much of the past year mired in controversy and playing defense as a result.

Ben-Ami was adamant in his speech that J Street will not be intimidated into abandoning its aggressive -- and sometimes jarring -- approach to the Middle East peace process. The organization's refusal to skirt controversy was evidenced by the fact that dozens of conference sessions dealt with provocative topics, including divestment from Israel (J Street is opposed) and the repercussions of continued settlement building (which J Street also opposes).

"Do not ask us to sit quietly by as the present Israeli government charts a course that erodes its Jewish character, undermines its democratic principles and leads to international isolation," Ben-Ami said to much applause during the opening plenary on Saturday. "It is not the criticism of Israel's policies that threatens the health of the state of Israel, but the policies being implemented by this particular government."

The American Jewish establishment, which has largely been wary of JStreet, "is putting the future of this community at risk," he said, by not embracing JStreet's big-tent philosophy, which mandates that even extremely harsh critics of Israel are welcome.

Rabbi David Saperstein, a JStreet stalwart since its inception nearly three years ago, had high praise for the organization in his Saturday-night address, but also used the podium to scold JStreet. The director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism unexpectedly ripped the group for its recent request that the Obama administration not veto a United Nations resolution opposing Israeli settlements.

JStreet's controversial stance on the U.N. measure raised "concerns among the base," and served only to further erode the group's credibility, Saperstein told a largely silent crowd.

"If you alienate the mainstream political and religious core of your support, you risk losing everything," Saperstein said, explaining that the U.N. action put JStreet's centrist base "in a very difficult position, driving some to feel they have to choose between remaining with J Street"and abandoning it.

For some, such as Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.), a former JStreet darling who cut his ties with the group last month over its stance on the resolution, "it was the straw that broke the camel's back," Saperstein noted.

A year of missteps, however, hasn't alienated the administration of President Barack Obama.

Last year, White House national security adviser James Jones promised J Street that an administration official would appear "at all future conferences." On Monday morning, it made good on that vow when Dennis Ross, a senior adviser on Middle East peace issues, took to the stage to deliver a markedly uncontroversial policy speech.

"He's a diplomat. He can only go so far," said Paul Schneider of Bethesda, 60, adding that he still found Ross' remarks "reassuring."

Focusing mainly on how Obama is approaching the ongoing unrest in the Middle East, Ross reminded attendees that restarting direct peace talks between the Israelis and Palestinians remains a top priority for the president.

Although efforts to prod the parties to return to the bargaining table have been unsuccessful, they "remain intense," Ross said. "We'll make a judgment on where the process is, where the two sides are and what we think the most appropriate steps are on where we'll have the most impact."

Following Ross' talk, Ben-Ami -- who once characterized J Street as the Obama administration's "blocking back" -- upbraided the president in a session with reporters Monday afternoon, maintaining that Obama's approach to the peace process in recent months has been lackadaisical. "We're beyond impatient," Ben-Ami said, declaring that it is now incumbent on Obama to formulate his own blueprint for peace.

The challenge J Street's faces in trying to placate both its left-leaning backers and its centrist supporters was especially evident Monday afternoon during a debate over international efforts to isolate Israel through boycott, divestment and sanctions, a tactic known as BDS. JStreet categorically opposes the use of BDS, but, in a bid to showcase the expansiveness of its big tent, invited a prominent Jewish supporter of the BDS movement to make her case before an overflow crowd.

BDS resembles "the tools of our heros," such as Martin Luther King Jr. and those who fought apartheid in South Africa, said Rebecca Vilkomerson, executive director of Jewish Voice for Peace. "It's very comforting to have this conversation in a Jewish space."

While JStreet officially rejects BDS, it was clear that some attendees don't. Scores of them fervently applauded Vilkomerson as she made her case. The panel's other three participants, among them author Bernard Avishai, advocated strongly against the tactic. (See accompanying story.)

JStreet's "tone has changed a little bit in the sense that it's coming into its own," said Marc Greidinger, a 47-year-old from Springfield.

Still, like many JStreet delegates, Greidinger has his gripes.

On a national level, the organization "is largely Jeremy Ben-Ami's, which Ithink has caused some problems" among supporters who want to play a bigger role in helping shape JStreet's mission and message, said Greidinger, who also attended JStreet's first confab. If the group becomes more democratic, he added, it could avoid some embarrassing and high-profile controversies.

"You don't have to deal with every event as if it needs an immediate response,"Greidinger said, adding that under a more democratic arrangement, supporters across the nation could provide Ben-Ami with much-needed "cover" when the need arises.

WASHINGTON JEWISH WEEK

The BDS sideshow
By Adam Kredo
March 2, 2011
http://washingtonjewishweek.com/main.asp?SectionID=4&SubSectionID=4&ArticleID=14499

Much controversy surrounded JStreet's decision to host a session on BDS during its recent four-day conference. Critics argued that JStreet was legitimizing a position that was beyold the Pale. JStreet countered that it's vital to engage in discourse with those who hold divergent views.

JStreet itself opposes the BDS movement, which urges Palestinian sympathizers to shun Israeli goods and companies. Still, it invited a prominent Jewish supporter of the BDS movement to plead her case before a standing-room-only crowd on Monday.

Rebecca Vilkomerson, executive director of Jewish Voice for Peace, a group that advocates for BDS, was greeted by rousing applause as she was introduced alongside author/activist Bernard Avishai, Ameinu President Kenneth Bob and Simone Zimmerman, a student at the University of California, Berkeley.

Vilkomerson immediately thanked J Street for having the courage to hold a panel discussion on such a polarizing topic, in contrast to most other mainstream Jewish groups, she added, which refuse to entertain the issue.

Hillel:The Foundation for Jewish Life on Campus, for instance, recently released guidelines for what it deems appropriate Israel-centric discourse; among the verboten topics listed is BDS.

However, Vilkomerson believes that BDS is "the most hopeful activity we can engage in" because it directly affects the Jewish state's economy. Divestment campaigns, she said, hit Israel the pocketbook, and therefore could force it to make tough concessions for peace.

The other panelists largely disagreed with Vilkomerson.

"I support all efforts to move toward a two-state solution, I just don't believe BDS does that," said Ameinu's Bob, explaining that boycotts of Israeli goods also harm Palestinians workers who help produce such products.

Avishai pointed out that, in his estimate, BDS campaigns could "cause the Israeli private sector to implode." Such an outcome would fail to help the Palestinians get their own state.

"This is absurd,"Avishai said. "Once you get this thing started, you have to be ready to carry it out to its end. Are you ready?"

UPDATE: 'Nearly 60' Congressmen attend J Street confab: The full list
By Adam Kredo
March 2, 2011
http://washingtonjewishweek.com/main.asp?SectionID=57&SubSectionID=76&ArticleID=14475

UPDATE: Rep. Jeff Fortenberry's office says he neither RSVP'd for, nor attended the confab/gala. See below.

"Nearly 60" members of Congress attended J Street's galla dinner during its second national conference, which wrapped up yesterday, officials reported.

J Street remains controversial on Capitol Hill and there was much kibitzing among insiders about who exactly would show up.

You'll recall that there was a congressional hullabaloo last year, in the lead up to J Street's first national conference, when a neoconservative consortium of rabble rousers pressured Republican and conservative Democrats to withdraw their sponsorship of the conference.

This year, J Street played it smarter, deciding not to request such sponsorships. They did, however, extend an invite to dozens of lawmakers, and, according to J Street officials, saw a decent turnout.

Altogether, 56 members RSVP'd in advance to the event, and "nearly 60" showed-up. As with any event of this nature, some members couldn't attend at the last minute, while others could.

Here's the list of all those who RSVP'd. I've noted members who, as far as I can tell, RSVP'd but didn't show up. I've also added the names of those who attended the dinner without advance notice. (The info was gleaned from an official list sent to me by J Street.)

-Representative Tammy Baldwin

-Representative Xavier Becerra

-Representative Howard Berman

-Representative Marsha Blackburn

-Representative Bruce Braley

-Senator Sherrod Brown

-Representative Lois Capps

-*Representative Russ Carnahan (Couldn't attend)

-Representative Andre Carson

-Representative Wm. Lacy Clay

-Representative Steve Cohen

-Representative Gerry Connolly

-Representative John Conyers

-Representative Jim Cooper

-Representative Danny Davis

-Representative Susan Davis

-Representative John Dingell

-Representative Lloyd Doggett

-Representative Donna Edwards

-Representative Keith Ellison

-Representative Anna Eshoo

-Representative Sam Farr

-Representative Bob Filner

-Representative Jeff Fortenberry

-Representative Charles Gonzalez

-Representative Raul Grijalva

-Representative Martin Heinrich

-Representative Rush Holt

-Representative Sheila Jackson Lee

-Representative Marcy Kaptur

-Senator Herbert Kohl

-Representative Dennis Kucinich

-Representative Barbara Lee

-Representative David Loebsack

-Representative Betty McCollum

-Representative Jim McDermott

-Representative Gregory Meeks

-*Senator Jeff Merkley (Couldn't attend)

-Representative Brad Miller

-Representative Gwen Moore

-Representative James Moran

-Representative Chris Murphy

-Representative Bill Owens

-Representative Bill Pascrell

-Representative Donald Payne

-Representative Chellie Pingree

-Representative Jared Polis

-Representative David Price

-Representative Nick Rahall

-Representative Jan Schakowsky

-Representative Jackie Speier

-Representative Chris Van Hollen

-Representative Maxine Waters

-Representative Peter Welch

-Representative Lynn Woolsey

-Representative John Yarmuth

-*Senator Maria Cantwell (Didn't RSVP, but attended.)

-*Representative Earl Blumenauer (Didn't RSVP, but attended.)

-*Representative Charlie Rangel (Didn't RSVP, but attended.)

I'll update and amend this list as need be.

It's also worthwhile to note that on Tuesday, more than 700 J Street activists took to Capitol Hill to cap off the four-day conference by lobbying lawmakers on several pro-Israel fronts.

During 240 separate meetings with lawmakers, J Street's citizen lobbyists urged their members of Congress to keep U.S. funding to both Israel and the Palestinian Authority robust.

UPDATE: Soon after posting this list, Rep. Jeff Fortenberry's office called me up to clarify his inclusion. They say he neither RSVP'd for, nor attended J Street's conference.

Amy Spitalnick, J Street's spokesperson, maintains that Fortenberry's office said he'd attend. (There was no e-mail confirmation, as I incorrectly indicated earlier.)

New York The Jewish Week
Connecting the World to Jewish News, Culture, and Opinion

Assessing J Street
By James Besser
February 25, 2011
http://www.thejewishweek.com/blogs/political_insider/assessing_j_street

Since last week's story on J Street, several readers have asked about my assessment of how the group is doing after almost three tumultuous years.

Is J Street – which holds its second national conference beginning on Saturday at the Washington Convention Center - starting to have an impact on Capitol Hill, or has its impact been exaggerated by the press and by its own PR people?

Has it succeeded in offering an alternative pro-Israel voice to Jews who support Israel but dislike some of its policies?

Has it achieved a toehold in American Jewish life despite fierce opposition from the pro-Israel establishment, or have its mistakes set it on the road to irrelevance? (Some of the latest opposition: the Emergency Committee for Israel is urging White House Middle East adviser Dennis Ross to use his scheduled appearance to "challenge J Street and the radical NGO's it invited," according to an official of the group).

Good questions; unfortunately, many of the answers are unclear. J Street remains a work in progress. Early signs are mixed.

In general, I think it's about where you'd expect a new group led by smart people in a politically challenging environment to be after almost three years.

Its growth has been strong; its membership is excited and galvanized, as the almost 2000 registered for the upcoming conference attest; it has created a lot of buzz in Washington. There's little question it has become a magnet for younger Jews who support Israel but have no interest in what many see as the "Israel is always right" stance of the traditional pro-Israel groups – no doubt one reason for the continuing attacks against the group.

Much less clear is its impact in Washington and the impact of its well publicized missteps. I don't need to reiterate those blunders – read my story. But there's little doubt missteps and miscalculations have energized the opposition and given J Street's most vehement detractors a lot of ammunition.

That opposition has had a mixed impact, it seems to me.

There's little doubt it has succeeded in making some of the people J Street needs the most – middle-of-the-road members of Congress who support Israel but dislike some of its policies – nervous about too tight an embrace with the progressive group.

J Street's loss of Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-NY) may have been the result of J Street errors, or it may be that he was looking for an excuse to shed the J Street burden because of the intense criticism. I know there are other members who are a little warier of getting too close to the group because of the anti-J Street attacks.

But the relentless, sometimes over the top attacks have also galvanized J Street's base, and from what I hear tipped some middle-of-the-road Jews from apathy to active support for the group. On Capitol Hill, J Street has developed an aggressive style of lobbying that has angered some lawmakers, and it may have chosen some issues unwisely if its goal is, as stated, to have the back of lawmakers who want to speak out for a more aggressive peace process but are afraid of the political consequences.

Its decision to urge the administration to withhold its veto when the UN General Assembly passed a resolution condemning Israel's settlement activities and labeling them illegal was an example. A skewed UN is too radioactive an issue even for most congressional doves; J Street's position on the resolution made a lot of its sympathizers on Capitol Hill very nervous.

The net result of that effort was probably a loss of influence for J Street.

I hear all the time that J Street is basically a pro-Obama group, and that it wields huge influence inside the Obama White House.

Access – yes. Major influence? I don't see much evidence.

The administration's early focus on Israeli settlements came from the President himself and some of his closest advisers, people tell me, not J Street – although J Street undoubtedly agreed. Since then, officials here haven't done much of what J Street wanted, from withholding a U.S. veto in the Security Council to taking a much more aggressive U.S. peace process role.

I suspect that if Jeremy Ben-Ami was the master puppeteer pulling strings at the White House, U.S. policy in the peace process would look very different than it does today. There's no doubt it has better access than most groups on the left have had. I don't see an administration whose Middle East policy has been inconsistent, at best, carrying J Street's water.

J Street's performance in terms of campaign finance remains unclear. The last election cycle didn't tell us much because it was such a Republican tidal wave, and almost all of the candidates J Street supported were Dems, some of whom lost for reasons having nothing to do with Israel policy. Joe Sestak didn't lose his Senate race in Pennsylvania because of J Street's support, despite the spin.

It takes a lot more than three years to develop the kind of political funding network that backs up AIPAC and other major lobbies. Ask me again in 10 years and I might have an intelligent answer.

As I said, its mistakes have set back its agenda. A more troubling question for J Street is this: does it have a constituency capable of sustaining it the way AIPAC sustains that group?
J Street is aimed at Jewish progressives – a notoriously diverse, diffuse and quarrelsome bunch with numerous political priorities, many of which are ranked as high or higher than the Israel issue.

AIPAC – and the other major pro-Israel groups – draw from a smaller but far more focused group of activists for whom Israel is always the first, and sometimes the only, object of their activism.

AIPAC has no trouble rallying its troops no matter what the issue; I suspect it will be harder for J Street. So far, they've done better than I expected on that score, but maintaining that over a period of years won't be easy.

As I said in my story, J Street has a continuing problem with the diversity of that grassroots base. Yes, there are many who take very moderate pro-peace process positions, but there are also BDS supporters, single staters, maybe some anti-Zionist Jews. J Street will continue to walk a precarious tightrope between that part of its base, which wants J Street to be more outspokenly leftist, and its other constituency – members of Congress and mainstream politicians who will flee in terror if they see the group moving in that direction.

And to a degree events are working against J Street.

Look at the peace camp in Israel – a faint shadow of what it once was. I know many former peaceniks here who are just so discouraged – by the multiple failures of the peace process, by the turn to the right in Israel, by the inept and vacillating Palestinian leadership, by administrations that promise strong U.S. leadership and then get bogged down in the swamps of Middle East maneuvering – that they've opted out of activism entirely.

The right doesn't have that problem; on the contrary, it appears energized, relatively united around a few core issues and convinced history is on their side.

That gap is something J Street will have to deal with if it wants to sustain its early growth.
On the other hand, J Street clearly holds appeal for the cohorts of younger Jews that have been pulling away from pro-Israel and Jewish involvement. In the long term, that may put J Street in a better position to challenge the pro-Israel establishment – if it can at the same time build confidence among the lawmakers they are lobbying and the congressional wannabees they hope will shift the balance in Congress on Middle East issues.

A tricky act? You bet.

New York The Jewish Week
Connecting the World to Jewish News, Culture, and Opinion

Blogging J Street, just a little
By James Besser
February 28, 2011
http://www.thejewishweek.com/blogs/political_insider/blogging_j_street_just_little

I can't spend a lot of time at J Street's second national conference, going on now at Washington's cavernous Convention Center, but I was there yesterday as a panelist in a session on the Jewish vote and spent a little time shmoozing, and I've been watching the sessions streamed on the J Street Web site. Here are a few fairly general observations.

I was impressed that J Street machers asked Rabbi David Saperstein to keynote the opening plenary.

They had to know that Saperstein, the longtime director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, wouldn't be an uncritical J Street cheerleader, and he didn't disappoint: while saying he is a "fervent fan" of the group, he took the group to task for its recent policy urging the Obama administration to consider not vetoing a UN resolution condemning Israel's settlements policies.

That policy "raises concerns," he said. "If you alienate mainstream support you risk losing everything."

J Street's members, by and large, probably have no problem with that policy; it's nervous lawmakers on Capitol Hill, the target of J Street's lobbying, who run for cover when the subject is action by a biased United Nations dealing with Israel.

I can't remember the last time I attended a major Jewish or pro-Israel conference where the sponsoring group allowed such overt criticism by a major speaker (some eliminate even the possibility of such incidents by writing drafts for keynote speakers).

Will this become a trend in Jewish communal life? Don't bet on it, but kudos for J Street for letting Saperstein have his say.

Senior Mideast adviser Dennis Ross was the featured speaker on Monday, and I thought he sounded a little defensive about administration efforts that are clearly not active enough for many J Streeters.

"If Israel can view one lesson from the events in Egypt, it is the danger of getting stuck with an unsustainable status quo," he said. "Just as the frustrations in Egypt grew over time, we should all recognize that the conflict with the Palestinians will only become more intractable over time. Our efforts to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace are ongoing, even when they are less visible."

He spent a lot of time on the surge of protest washing across the Arab world and the potential, at least, for genuine reform. That, he said, may "finally enable the region to address the long-standing problem that political stagnation actually limited the prospects for comprehensive peace and regional reconciliation."

On balance, it was a cautious, safe speech – a plus for J Street that he appeared, probably pretty unsatisfying for many in the audience who see the Obama administration as way too timid in its peacemaking efforts.

I participated in a Sunday morning panel discussion on the 2010 elections. The questions, by and large, were moderate. But this is clearly a bunch of people who are impatient with the current (non)pace of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, frustrated with the Obama administration and open to other ideas for solving the conflict.

I got taken to task for referring to the traditional pro-Israel groups as the "mainstream pro-Israel community." "We're mainstream," one angry audience member chastised me after the panel. Point taken; while some in the Jewish community see J Street as anything but mainstream, it's not the role of journalists to categorize them as something else. So it was pejorative on my part, and I'll try to remember that.

"BDS" - boycotts, divestment and sanctions – is clearly a rumble just beneath the surface that will be difficult for J Street to control.

J Street itself is opposed, period. But there are participants who believe very targeted kinds of economic penalties focusing on settlements – are appropriate ways of getting the attention of Israel's leaders.

The problem for J Street: BDS IS seen as anti-Israel by most of the organized Jewish community, a perception amplified by some BDS advocates who seem to single Israel out among all the nations of the world as deserving the sanctions treatment.

The issue is a radioactive one for J Street, and how they handle it will have a big impact on whether their third national conference, whenever that may be, will be as successful as the current one.

A session on the BDS movement this afternoon features an official of the Jewish Voice for Peace, which advocates targeted divestment; according to the published schedule, this session will not be streamed live.

I'm not surprised, given the risk in the issue for J Street.

Some other observations:

- Predictably, it's a young crowd. Yes, there are plenty of people who, like me, are in the "get the senior discount without asking" category, but the average participant here is significantly younger than you'd see at an AIPAC policy conference, or an ADL convention.

- J Street officials seem pretty pleased with the turnout and the level of enthusiasm. More than 2000 registered participants, up from 1500 at the first conference.

- But the Washington Convention Center was a risky choice for a venue, inviting unflattering comparisons with AIPAC, whose annual policy conference fills the place to overflowing. J Street occupied what seemed like only a small corner of the place, way in the back – forcing participants and reporters to walk past several other in-progress conventions.

You can bet there will be more negative comparisons after tonight's banquet. AIPAC fills the fully expanded main hall – the crowd is so big, you need a telescope. J Street can't draw even a fraction of that. So why not a smaller hall, and pack it to overflowing?

New York The Jewish Week
Connecting the World to Jewish News, Culture, and Opinion

J Street lobbies Congress for Israel and Palestinian aid
By James Besser
March 1, 2011
http://www.thejewishweek.com/blogs/political_insider/j_street_lobbies_congress_israel_and_palestinian_aid

J Street, wrapping up its second national conference today, will fan out over Capitol Hill for a round of lobbying meetings that will deliver a message that could – at least in part -- could warm AIPAC's heart: don't cut aid to Israel.

That, along with a call to continue aid to the Palestinian Authority in the interests of a two-state solution, is the sole "ask" in about 250 Hill meetings – mostly local J Streeters going to their own representatives offices, taking another page out of AIPAC's play book.

That deliberately centrist message may reflect what J Street director Jeremy Ben-Ami described in a Jewish Week story as a tactical shift by the group aimed at reassuring potential friends in Congress that the group he founded and leads isn't out of the pro-Israel mainstream.
That's not going to protect J Street against hits from the right; today there were emails circulating claiming that the group is lobbying for Palestinian aid – and omitting the part about supporting aid to Israel at continuing levels.

It also won't help with the hard left, which increasingly is washing its hands of a group it sees as far too eager to join the more traditional pro-Israel activist community.

Richard Silverstein, in his influential Tikun Olam blog, wrote about the "condescending, dismissive, litmus-test-driven J Street which drives me up a wall" because of the group's treatment of groups further to the left, and particularly boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) advocates.

He writes: "Jeremy Ben Ami specializes in the old Clinton triangulation strategy. You tack straight down the middle between right and left. By doing so you gain the respect of the broad middle that eschews tags of extreme ideology or partisanship. But there's one big problem with this approach. There is no 'broad middle' that remains in either the American Jewish community or Israel. There is the far right, which is dominant and the left which is largely quiescent. So by hewing to a middle road you essentially satisfy very few."

Silverstein is right – but he's also missing the point.

J Street's triangulation isn't aimed at the broader Jewish community, but at the members of Congress who will be key to its success as a "pro-Israel, pro-peace process" *lobby*: centrist politicians who support Israel but object to many of its policies, and want to see a much more aggressive U.S. involvement in ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Again, this points to the inherent conflict I've written about between J Street's grass roots constituency – which, like Silverstein, wants it to be more explicitly leftist and more critical of an administration it sees as waffling on its commitment to make Middle East peace a priority – and the folks on Capitol Hill, who are very nervous about getting targeted as anti-Israel by political groups that have been lowering the bar for exactly what being anti-Israel means.

Can J Street keep its core members happy while working to reassure members of Congress who may be inclined to support it that it won't get them in political hot water? That's the $64 dollar question that – more than all the attacks from the far right and the far left – will determine whether J Street succeeds, or is just another communal one-hit wonder.

New York The Jewish Week
Connecting the World to Jewish News, Culture, and Opinion

Obama meets the Jews: interpretation is everything
By James Besser
March 2, 2011
http://www.thejewishweek.com/blogs/political_insider/obama_meets_jews_interpretation_everything

JTA is reporting that a delegation of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations met with President Obama on Tuesday and that the meeting went well, with Mr. Obama expressing his undying commitment to Israel's security and the assorted Jewish leaders proclaiming themselves satisfied – at least on the record.

Off the record, I had calls from activists on both sides of a deeply divided pro-Israel community, with some on the right saying the president was aggressive on the issue of settlements and that he seemed to put much more of the onus for the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian stalemate on a "stronger" Israel, other participants saying that they saw little new at the meeting, and certainly no signs of hostility to Israel.

Pardon me if I don't shout "Stop the presses" like a chain-smoking editor in Citizen Kane. We've heard this enough times before to know the routine: the Presidents Conference includes a pretty wide range of Jewish groups, and at every one of these sessions presidential statements are filtered through individual ideologies and expectations in ways that make accurate reporting of what happened extraordinarily difficult.

After several conversations about the meeting, a couple of things seem safe to say:

- The President is frustrated
- The President is hoping Jewish leaders here can play a role in convincing the Netanyahu government that settlements really ARE a problem.
- The President is aware of concerns about Israel's growing isolation, and believes the remedy is to find some way forward in the peace process
- The President has no new schemes up his sleeve for getting past the current Israeli-Palestinian impasse.

That last point was evident as well in senior adviser Dennis Ross's speech to J Street on Monday.

While saying "Our efforts to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace are ongoing, even when they are less visible" and talking about "ticking clocks," I'm increasingly convinced Ross's real message to the pro-peace process group was this: don't get your hopes up about any dramatic new U.S. initiatives. With the Middle East in a state of unprecedented ferment and with little indication either Netanyahu or Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas is ready for bold steps, the White House is in wait and see mode when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Which gets me back to yesterday's White House meeting. I wasn't there, and I've done enough of these stories to know that when they touch on the volcanic Middle East, interpretation is everything.

Over at Politico, Ben Smith quoted a participant saying "Those who have concerns about the President and his policies were not converted and those who don't have problems were not given cause for concern." That seems about as good a description as I've heard.

What I wonder: do these meetings actually help administrations – especially since in every single case, participants come out with such widely different interpretations of what happened? Or is this just about checking the Jewish box, and making sure pictures of a bunch of leaders in kippot sitting around the table with the president appear in Jewish newspapers?

Don't blame Obama; this has happened with every recent president, Democratic and Republican.

J Street sign: Keep left: Confab includes few voices on right, or even in middle
March 3, 2011
http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/61030/j-street-signkeep-left-confab-includes-few-voices-on-right-or-even-in-middl/

The detractors of J Street, the self-billed "pro-Israel, pro-peace" lobbying organization, like to portray the organization's leader, Jeremy Ben-Ami, as so far to the left of mainstream American Jewish opinion as to be out of bounds.

If they think Ben-Ami is too much of a lefty on Israel, just wait till they meet J Street's rank and file.

At the organization's four-day conference in Washington, D.C., which ended March 1, the crowd was emphatic in its insistence on Palestinian rights, offered only weak, scattered applause for an Obama administration official's line about America's strong support for Israeli security and complained that more Palestinians should have been featured on conference panels. Organizers said the conference drew 2,400 people.

One of them was Arnold Moses, an activist in his 70s from Reston, Va., who said J Street actually wasn't reflective of his politics. "They're too kind to the Israelis," he said of J Street. "Obama's too soft on Israel. The Palestinians need to get out of the jail they're in."

Activists from the traditional pro-Israel camp have seized upon such sentiment as evidence that J Street is not pro-Israel but pro-Palestinian. They question the organization's funding sources, its association with certain Arab and far-left organizations and its advocacy of U.S. pressure on Israel.

But in J Street's view, this misses the point. For Ben-Ami and J Street supporters, being pro-Palestinian is not incompatible with being pro-Israel. In their mind, standing up for Palestinian rights, criticizing Israel's policies in the West Bank and advocating for more pressure on the Israeli government is a way of supporting Israel by helping, or forcing, Israel to become the kind of place they believe it ought to be.

"We don't view this as a zero-sum conflict," Ben-Ami said Feb. 28 in a Q&A session with reporters. "You can be pro-Israel and be an advocate for the rights of the Palestinian people."

This approach explains why many audience members applauded when a questioner on one panel asked why the United States doesn't impose economic sanctions on Israel if Israeli settlements in the West Bank are a violation of the Geneva Convention. It's why they clapped when panelist Marwan Bishara, an Al Jazeera political analyst, wondered aloud why Dennis Ross, the Obama administration's senior envoy on Middle East issues, was invited to the conference at all. It's

why the introduction of New York Times columnist Roger Cohen, a fierce critic of U.S. aid to Israel, drew enthusiastic whooping before he had even uttered a word.

For this crowd, the Israeli government is to blame for the lack of peace in the Middle East. Their main beef is with the traditional pro-Israel camp, not with the Palestinians.

"I would have liked to see an Israeli uprising of the people against our government," Ron Pundak, director general of the Peres Center for Peace, said in a Feb. 27 panel discussion about the uprisings in the Arab world. The Israeli people should "get rid of this terrible government which today is governing Israel."

Ben-Ami wasn't entirely comfortable with every speaker at the conference. But borrowing a line long recited by the New Israel Fund, he said J Street is committed to having an open conversation, including with parties with which it disagrees.

That's why, he said, he invited Jewish Voice for Peace, an organization classified by the Anti-Defamation League as one of the top 10 anti-Israel groups in the United States and which promotes the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement targeting Israel, even though, Ben-Ami said, he and J Street are against the BDS campaign.

If any Jewish voices were absent from the conference, it was those on the right side of the political spectrum. But even centrist voices were few and far between. The lack of diversity did not go unnoticed by some of the younger people at the conference.

"They could have used some more right-leaning speakers to balance their perspective," said Avi Fine, a student at Carleton College in Minnesota.

"There wasn't enough disagreeing," said another student, Mika Gang of Toronto's Ryerson University. "It would be cool to have more right-wing, more dissenting viewpoints."

In the lineup at J Street, the most right-wing speakers seemed to be Ross (who represents a White House criticized by many American Jews as too left-wing on Israel) and Nachman Shai (an Israeli Knesset member from Kadima, a centrist party that leads opposition to the right-wing coalition of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu).

Even Ben-Ami found himself on the right end of the J Street spectrum, with his positions supporting sanctions against Iran and opposing the BDS movement, and his hard line against J Street associating with those who deny Israel's right to exist.

When Ben-Ami told reporters, "This is unapologetically and unabashedly a pro-Israel organization that believes in the state for the Jewish people," he spoke while sitting in the same chair where an hour earlier a young Jewish attendee casually was chatting with a friend about how he considers himself an anti-Zionist.

One of the few conference sessions featuring sharp disagreement was about the BDS movement. Rebecca Vilkomerson, executive director of Jewish Voice for Peace, compared the campaign's

tactics to those of Gandhi, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Cesar Chavez, saying it's "the most hopeful strategy we can engage in."

Kenneth Bob, president of Ameinu, a labor Zionist group whose motto is "liberal values, progressive Israel," argued that BDS seeks to displace Israel, not simply end the occupation of the West Bank. He said he sees "no common cause" with BDS leaders.

The crowd at the conference, the organization's second since its inception three years ago, was hardly monolithic. It included men and women in kippahs and the occasional woman in a hijab; Israeli politicians and Palestinian journalists; gray-haired rabbis from California and college students from Vermont, including non-Jewish ones.

Israeli Knesset members who came were slammed in the Israeli media for their decision to participate, and Michael Oren, the Israeli ambassador to the United States, declined an invitation to attend (for the second straight year).

Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg attended the gala dinner Feb. 28, and was honored with the organization's Tzedek v'Shalom (justice and peace) award.

In addition, some 60 members of Congress came to the dinner. The list of those at the dinner, or who gave an RSVP indicating that they would be attending, according to a J Street spokesperson, included Reps. Barbara Lee (D-Oakland), Lynn Woolsey (D-Petaluma), Jackie Speier (D-San Mateo), Anna Eshoo (D–South Bay) and Sam Farr (D-Monterey).

Still, it was a fraction of the number that regularly show up for AIPAC's gala dinner. And one former J Street ally in Congress, Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.), wasn't there, having publicly severed ties with the organization in January when J Street petitioned the Obama administration not to veto a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlements.

Ackerman called J Street "so open-minded about what constitutes support for Israel that its brains have fallen out," saying in a statement, "America really does need a smart, credible, politically active organization that is as aggressively pro-peace as it is pro-Israel. Unfortunately, J Street ain't it."

Nevertheless, by any measure, the massing of some 2,400 people for a conference by a 3-year-old Jewish organization is a sign of notable success. Moreover, on March 2, J Street delegates had more than 200 meetings, on Capitol Hill according to a spokesperson, with senators and other members of Congress.

All of that is an indication that in the future, this "pro-Israel, pro-peace" lobby may have greater influence over U.S.-Israeli issues — or, at least, the discourse within the Jewish community.

Ben Ami says AIPAC should recognize that.

"I think the time has come for them to agree to take the stage with us and with these issues," Ben-Ami said of AIPAC. "We are a legitimate, established part of the communal conversation."

D.C.
By Dougus M. Bloomfield
March 4, 2011

According to German sources, she told [Benjamin Netanyahu] she was "disappointed" that he had not "made a single step to advance peace."

"It's not what he said, it's what he didn't say," one activist told me. "There are more than 2,000 people here who support the administration's peace policy and want it to succeed. He could have galvanized that support but failed. He could have said we're doing everything we can to bring peace, but he didn't."

In listing the administration's priorities "the push for peace between Israelis, Palestinians and their Arab neighbors" was mentioned only in passing, and clearly without the sense of urgency the J Streeters wanted to hear.

It wasn't a white flag of surrender, but it sure seems like the Obama administration is beating a retreat from the Middle East peace process it once embraced with great enthusiasm.

Administration officials still talk about working to bring the parties together, but the truth is neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians seem much interested, and officials here have finally gotten the memo.

Veteran administration negotiator Dennis Ross dashed hopes of many on February 28 at the second national conference of J Street.

At the self-described pro-Israel, pro-peace process lobby, Ross said that as the winds of unrest sweep across the Middle East, the spects for progress toward Israeli-Palestinian peace are being swept away.

Delegates were disappointed to hear that the addoes not know when, or even if, Israeli and Palestinian leaders will be ready to sit down to talk with each other.
Even indirect talks appear iffy.

A similar message also came from the top United Nations Middle East envoy Robert H. Serry, a Dutch diplomat, as he made his rounds of briefings in Washington in recent days.

But the toughest language came from German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose office leaked the contents of a tense phone call last week in which she reportedly told Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that his false statements and failure to keep promises directly contribute to Israel's growing international isolation.

According to German sources, she told Netanyahu she was "disappointed" that he had not "made a single step to advance peace."

She was also said to be highly skeptical when he told her he was considering launching a new peace initiative at some future date.

Other European leaders are said to share her anger.

One source in Washington suggested Netanyahu is talking to the GOP House leadership about addressing a joint meeting of the Congress when he comes here in May for the AIPAC policy conference.

His purpose would be to try to portray himself as the peace seeker, and focus international attention on the Palestinians as the obstructionists.

J Street enjoys reasonably good access to the White House, meeting even with the President, and was energized by his early enthusiasm for pushing both parties to the peace table. But after a false start last autumn, the enterprise has collapsed and the old enthusiasm has disappeared. Today the administration apparently sees the prospects of success as so bleak it is reluctant to risk any more political capital on active mediation efforts as a difficult election year approaches, especially when so few in Congress appear inclined to back it.

J Streeters were stunned that Ross didn't speak more about the Israeli-Palestinian issue and focused mostly on Egypt, leaving the impression among many that the peace process was being shelved.

"It's not what he said, it's what he didn't say," one activist told me. "There are more than 2,000 people here who support the administration's peace policy and want it to succeed. He could have galvanized that support but failed. He could have said we're doing everything we can to bring peace, but he didn't."

Ross said, "We will continue to press both sides to engage seriously in negotiations" and meetings will continue between the International Quartet and the two sides, but even that was vague.
In listing the administration's priorities "the push for peace between Israelis, Palestinians and their Arab neighbors" was mentioned only in passing, and clearly without the sense of urgency the J Streeters wanted to hear.

UN Envoy Robert Serry is telling people here that the Palestinian Authority fears the unrest sweeping the Arab world will engulf the West Bank as well.

Palestinian youth are saying they have two lousy choices - Fatah and Hamas - and a not-very hopeful future. The PA, he said, worries that the youth will stage an intifada against the establishment.

As a result, Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad is trying to negotiate a truce with Hamas to head off possible internecine violence. If the past is any indicator, he will fail.

Meanwhile, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has retreated to the Yasir Arafat position minus the violence, Serry reportedly said.

Abbas has decided to bypass direct (and possibly indirect) talks with Israel in favor of going to the United Nations with various resolutions, culminating in recognition of statehood. He knows that will fail - as Ross warned in his J Street speech - but his real goal is to force the United States to put forth its own peace plan, which he expects will be much closer to his position than Netanyahu's.

The J Street delegates wanted to hear a rousing call to action by an administration determined to reinvigorate a moribund Middle East peace process. Beyond the confines of the Washington Convention Center, there seemed little enthusiasm for the enterprise.

J-Street Activists From Boston Converge on Washington, D.C. for National Conference
By Tucker Lieberman
March 17, 2011
http://www.jewishjournal.org/story/news_features/j-street_activists_from_boston_converge_on_washington_d.c._for_national_con/

A delegation of more than 120 Boston-area J Street activists converged on Washington in early March to attend J Street's national conference, "Giving Voice to Our Values."

The conference featured inspiring plenum sessions, panel discussions and workshops, capped by a dedicated lobbying day during which Boston activists met with Senators Scott Brown and John Kerry, Representatives Michael Capuano, Barney Frank, Stephen Lynch, Ed Markey and Niki Tsongas, and staffers of Representatives John Tierney and Bill Keating.

The lobbyists presented the case for continuing funding to Israel and to the Palestinian Authority during this critical time when both parties may be asked to make some tough decisions.

Speaker after speaker celebrated the Jewish emphasis on social justice. "The Jewish tradition is a tradition of justice and human dignity," said the New Israel Fund's President Naomi Chazan.

"Loving someone means telling the truth to that person," she continued, explaining why it is sometimes necessary to criticize Israeli policy, particularly with regard to the treatment of the Palestinians.

Knesset member Orit Zuaretz said she was heartened by the participation of so many young people in J-Street. On panels such as "Can Young Jews Reclaim (or Redefine) a Robust Connection to Israel?" advocates for a pro-Israel, pro-peace solution shared their organizations' successes and challenges.

With students representing 128 colleges, the J-Street conference showed the wide appeal that the message has for young Jews. Leah Steinberg, a Needham resident and student at University of Michigan, said, "The conference was a great wake-up call to me about what active involvement can mean… Israel is so important to me, which is why I hope to see J-Street's views about a two-state solution and the United States working as Israel's friend become more known within the Jewish community."

A featured address by top Obama administration Middle East advisor Ambassador Dennis Ross expressed the need for a peace plan that will move past an "unsustainable status quo," and be viable in the long term.

"We want these new leaders," said Ambassador Ross, referring to Israel's youth, "to believe in coexistence and to have a stake in coexistence."

The wave of demonstrations sweeping Arab countries was at the forefront of everyone's minds. While many speakers emphasized that the Arab awakening is fundamentally about Arabs' dignity and freedom in their own countries and isn't directly related to Israel, others pointed out that Palestinian sovereignty will quickly become a rallying point, and that a similar nonviolent Palestinian uprising may likely be coming soon.

Israeli Print

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J Street confab sparks schism in Kadima
By Gil Hoffman
February 24, 2011
http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=209599

"This organization is doing tremendous damage to Israel," MK Ze'ev Bielski says.

Four Kadima MKs who accepted an invitation to speak at this weekend's J Street conference in Washington faced criticism on Wednesday from colleagues in their faction who said they should not be supporting the left-wing American lobby.

MKs Nachman Shai, Yoel Hasson, Shlomo Molla and Orit Zuaretz of Kadima will address the conference, along with Labor MKs Amir Peretz and Daniel Ben-Simon. J Street tried unsuccessfully to get more senior Israeli politicians to come, including the most dovish minister in the cabinet, Intelligence Services Minister Dan Meridor (Likud).

J Street angered MKs across the political spectrum when it refused to oppose the UN Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlements, a position that precipitated the Israeli Embassy's decision not to participate in the conference. Though J Street had hoped the resolution wouldn't come to a vote and that some of the language would be altered, it objected to the US vetoing a resolution in line with long-standing American policy against settlement construction.

Kadima MKs said they were also upset with J Street for undermining the international effort to prevent the nuclearization of Iran, criticizing the IDF's handling of the Gaza flotilla and Israel's Gaza policy, and helping facilitate a visit to Capitol Hill by Judge Richard Goldstone, whose UN-sponsored report accused Israel of committing war crimes during Operation Cast Lead.

"I have my own criticism of the current government, but there have to be limits, and this organization is doing tremendous damage to Israel," said Kadima MK Ze'ev Bielski, a former Jewish Agency chairman.

"J Street may have good intentions and think they want what is best for Israel, but when they oppose an American president vetoing an anti-Israel resolution at the Security Council and take a hostile position against our naval commandos who were trying to save their lives from goons who wanted to kill them on the flotilla, they cross red lines," he declared.

MK Shai Hermesh added that he could do his job of trying to topple the government while in Israel, but when he went abroad, he wouldn't cooperate with any organization that worked against the Israeli government.

“It is too bad that some of my colleagues do not understand the danger of supporting an organization that is working against Israel,” Hermesh said.

Coalition chairman Ze’ev Elkin (Likud) also lashed out at the Kadima MKs attending the conference. In a speech in the Knesset plenum, he said Kadima proved that it was a leftwing extremist party by sending lawmakers to the J Street conference.

Shai defended his decision to attend the conference, but did not defend J Street. He distanced himself from J Street executive director Jeremy Ben-Ami’s assertion that his organization’s stance was like that of Kadima.

“He can say that J Street is Kadima, but Kadima is not J Street,” Shai said. “I am not a supporter of J Street, but I support Jews helping Israel, each in their own way. There are young people who have questions, and if we don’t answer them, we may lose them. We are too small a people to throw anyone away.”

Shai said he would focus his remarks at the conference on the legitimacy of Israel. He said he would defend building in Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem and settlement blocs outside the capital.

Hasson said he had decided to attend the conference even though he disagreed with many J Street policies. He said that in his speech there, he would criticize J Street for opposing the American veto at the Security Council.

“I don’t see J Street as extreme Left,” he said. “I see it as a legitimate organization that wants to help Israel. I would cooperate with any Jewish organization in the US.”

J Street announced on Wednesday that it was expecting more than 2,000 activists, religious leaders and students to attend its second annual conference.

Hilary Leila Krieger contributed to this report.

THE JERUSALEM POST
Israel's best-selling English daily and most-read English website

E. J'lem activist organization to arrange weekly protests
By Melanie Lidman
February 24, 2011
http://www.jpost.com/JewishWorld/JewishNews/Article.aspx?id=209613

Solidarity movement volunteer will receive J Street's Honoring Our Heroes award at the organization's conference in Washington.

The Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity Movement, the grassroots organization that has organized weekly protests in the east Jerusalem neighborhood, is taking steps to become a national activist organization, leaders told The Jerusalem Post on Tuesday.

One of the organization's central volunteers, Sarah Beninga, will receive J Street's Honoring Our Heroes award at the organization's conference in Washington this weekend. The movement decided to use the award as a launching point for its national expansion, which will see the group renamed "Solidarity."

The group's new manifesto, released on Tuesday, calls for an end to the "occupation" and the "liquidation or fundamental change of organizations that contribute to the dispossession of Arabs, including the Jewish Agency, the Jewish National Fund, and the Israel Lands Authority."

"The movement is an example of how Jews and Arabs can work together in successful ways, and this can be translated to other areas of the country," said the group's spokesman, Avner Inbar.

The Friday protests in Sheikh Jarrah were launched in November 2009, following the eviction of three Arab families in Sheikh Jarrah. For the past 15 months, the demonstrations have drawn an average of 200 to 300 activists for two-hour rallies with signs in English, Hebrew and Arabic, and a lively drum corps.

The group will oversee weekly protests in Lod, Taibe and Beit She'an against housing demolitions, evictions and "mechanisms that preserve the regime of privilege for Jews," Inbar said. The organization, which has no paid members and no offices, will have bases in universities around the country, including the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Ben-Gurion University in Beersheba and Tel Aviv University.

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J Street aims to have 2,000 at weekend conference in DC
By Hilary Leila Krieger
February 25, 2011
http://www.jpost.com/JewishWorld/JewishNews/Article.aspx?id=209808

50 members of Congress, Kadima, Labor MKs and Palestinian officials are expected to attend the second-annual conference at Capitol Hill.

WASHINGTON – More than 50 members of Congress are expected to attend J Street's second-annual conference here this weekend, with 200 offices receiving the progressive group's lobbyists during its visit to Capitol Hill on Tuesday, according to the organization.

The number of federal lawmakers coming to the conference gala on Monday night are slightly more than the 44 who came last year, but well under the 148 lawmakers who served as a host committee at the last conference. This year J Street has no host committee.

"Our focus really is on bringing people to the conference. "We're expecting to have over 50 members of Congress [attend] and we'll see J Street's and this movement's growth at the conference and the gala itself," J Street spokeswoman Amy Spitalnick said.

She dismissed any connection between the lack of a host committee and the controversy it generated last year, when several members of Congress rescinded their participation.

Originally 160 members had agreed to be on the host committee, but some prominent figures, including New York Senators Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, dropped out after saying they hadn't been aware of their inclusion on the list.

More recently, J Street lost the backing of another key politician, Rep. Gary Ackerman of New York, ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs' Middle East subcommittee, after the group opposed last Friday's US veto of a UN Security Council draft resolution condemning Israeli settlements, costing J Street Israeli support as well.

Spitalnick, however, credited the controversy over the host committee's composition last year with helping boost the numbers at that conference, for which fewer than 1,000 people pre-registered but 1,500 ended up attending. She pointed to a similar effect in Boston last fall, where an event expected to garner 100 people to hear executive director Jeremy Ben-Ami speak mushroomed to 450 audience members after the synagogue hosting the event canceled it.

"I think it was that controversy that really excited and motivated people to really come out and attend," she said.

California Reps. Lois Capps and Lynn Woolsey, North Carolina Rep. David Price, Tennessee Rep. Steve Cohen and Colorado Rep. Jared Polis, the latter two of whom are Jewish, will address the conference on Monday. The organization said it was not able to release a list of those attending the gala or hosting the Capital Hill meetings before the event itself.

This year, more than 2,000 activists, religious leaders and students will participate, according to J Street. The last group will increase from 200 last time to around 500 this weekend. And for the first time, 40 local chapters around the US will also be represented, following the launch of J Street's grassroot effort last winter.

They will hear from top White House Middle East adviser Dennis Ross, several Kadima and Labor MKs and Palestinian officials. Among the latter will be PLO Ambassador to the US Maen Areikat and Mustafa Barghouti, secretary-general of the Palestinian National Initiative.

Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren and other embassy staff, however, will not be participating, for the second year in a row.

Following the J Street decision opposing the US veto of the UN Security Council resolution, Oren reached out to Ben-Ami to explain he would not be attending, according to embassy spokesman Jonathan Peled.

"They had a very good and candid conversation," he said, noting the embassy had hosted J Street leadership during an equally candid meeting in the fall. "We will continue to maintain a dialogue with this organization in the future."

"We feel that they're missing an important opportunity to engage with 2,000-plus pro- Israel, pro-peace Americans," Spitalnick said. "We've made every effort to engage with the embassy while acknowledging our differences of opinion, and it's a shame that they've chosen not to participate."

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Diaspora Affairs Minister slams Livni for J street support
By Gil Hoffman
February 28, 2011
http://www.jpost.com/Headlines/Article.aspx?id=210229

Diaspora Affairs Minister Yuli Edelstein sent a strongly worded letter to opposition leader Tzipi Livni on Monday protesting the letter of support that she sent the leftist American Jewish lobby J Street. Livni had wished the organization well in honor of its annual conference and expressed regret that she could not attend.

Edeslstein said that J Street was engaged in blatant anti-Israel activity, including lobbying Congressmen to support anti-Israel legislation, harming efforts of Israeli diplomats to reach out to college students, and asking the American administration not to veto a UN resolution condemning Israel. He said Livni made a mistake by allowing four Kadima MKs to speak at the conference.

"Taking an active part in a conference whose entire goal is to question Israel's legitimacy and stability crosses a red line that had not been crossed before by a Zionist party," Edelstein wrote Livni. "Your support for your MKs participating in the conference is an endorsement by Kadima of efforts to encourage boycotts of Israel."

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Speaker chastises J Street for opposing US veto at UN
By Hilary Leila Krieger
February 28, 2011
http://www.jpost.com/International/Article.aspx?id=210132

Israel activist appeals to Dennis Ross, who will address confab in DC, to 'deliver much-needed moral clarity'.

WASHINGTON – Reform Movement leader David Saperstein opened J Street's second annual conference on Saturday by chastising the group for opposing the recent US veto of a UN resolution condemning Israel settlements.

Saperstein told 2,000-plus J Street advocates that its position on the veto jeopardized its support among mainstream Jews and backers on Capitol Hill and could diminish the three-year-old lobby's political influence.

"You lose your political and media clout if you lose your mainstream wing," said Saperstein, who heads the Washington-based Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism. "Successful strategy and tactics need to consider not only the theoretical decisions you take but the practical impact of those you choose."

He noted that so many Jews, on the Left as well as the Right, so distrust the UN on Israel that supporting a resolution is seen as supporting the UN's stance on the Jewish state.

"You know that the vast majority of the members of Congress that you support and support you while criticizing Israel's settlement policy cannot support UN condemnation, and you will put them all in a very difficult position, driving some to feel they have to choose between remaining with J Street," Saperstein said.

Similarly, he pointed out that many Conservative and Reform rabbis who support J Street didn't endorse this position.

"If they begin to move away from J Street and they leave one by one, this has the potential [for J Street] to become just another group that says the right things but without real impact," he said.

Saperstein, who strongly backs the organization's "pro-Israel, pro-peace" message, stressed that supporting the UN resolution was "a tough call," but urged the group only "to take the most controversial decisions when it really counts."

J Street Executive Director Jeremy Ben-Ami, who followed Saperstein on stage, thanked Saperstein for his "inspiring words," as well "for the challenge" he laid down for the organization.

Ben-Ami told The Jerusalem Post after Saturday night's event that the organization faces the disadvantage of alienating supporters on controversial decisions, but that "the upside is that J Street stands up for what it believes and maintains the connection to the people who are part of J Street."

Ben-Ami said he was aware of the content of Saperstein's comments ahead of time, and said the decision to feature him as the night's first and longest speaker showed that "we actually engage in an open and free discussion about issues."

He said the same principle underpins the group's decision to include a panel on the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel that is anathema to many Israel advocates.

The panel's participants, particularly Rebecca Vilkomerson of the pro-BDS group Jewish Voice for Peace, were roundly criticized by Noah Pollak of the Emergency Campaign for Israel, among others included in the three-day convention.

In a letter to Dennis Ross, the top White House adviser on Middle East issues, who will be addressing the conference on Monday, Pollak wrote, "There are few moments when someone with your experience and credibility is invited into the anti-Israel echo chamber and provided an opportunity to dispel myths, combat falsehoods, deliver much-needed moral clarity – and state clearly that the United States stands with Israel. I trust that you will seize this moment to explain why the Jewish state is not just one of our closest allies, but a country that fully deserves the admiration and moral support of all Americans."

Ben-Ami said that J Street itself strongly opposes the BDS movement, but that "we engage with people we disagree with. We don't shut them out. Those who are involved in the BDS movement in the Jewish community should be argued with and shown that they're wrong, but to just shut them out is wrong."

At the same time, Ben-Ami, as well as Saperstein, distinguished between campaigns to boycott Israel entirely versus those targeting products and institutions in the West Bank.

Saperstein argued that if Israel is going to succeed in defeating the delegitimization campaign, "we have to distinguish between delegitimization and BDS under any circumstances."

Not distinguishing between the Israeli artists' boycott of a new theater in the Ariel settlement and boycotts on goods made in the West Bank, and calling Israel an apartheid state, means "we're running out of the community millions of Israel's avid supporters," Saperstein said.

He said that Israel's advocates need as broad a tent as possible to succeed on delegitimization and other important issues, such as maintaining aid for Israel.

Saperstein specifically warned about the danger of cutting foreign aid to every recipient other than Israel, or removing Israel from the traditional foreign aid basket. A Tea Party-infused

Congress has recently cut millions of dollars in aid in various programs but left funding for Israel intact, as well as for Egypt and the Palestinian Authority.

But Saperstein warned about reductions to humanitarian programs while Israel remains untouched.

If Congress cuts "money for environmental protection and to combat poverty and to combat HIV/AIDS and... combating the burden of debt, and all of this is endangered while Israel aid remains secure, it's a disaster for Israel, a disaster for the United States," he said.

J Street's main lobbying piece during participants' trip to Capitol Hill on Tuesday will focus on promoting democracy and prosperity in the Middle East, as well as urging Congress to continue funding the PA.

"Continued assistance to the Palestinian Authority's institution and state-building efforts in the West Bank will allow the PA to grow its economy, meet the basic needs of its people and reduce the risk of terror aimed at Israel," reads a letter from Illinois Democratic Rep. Jan Schakowsky that J Street activists will press members to back.

"Such aid is also essential to maximize the prospects for a negotiated resolution that establishes two states for two people living side by side in peace and security."

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Ross calls Israeli-Palestinian situation 'unsustainable'
By Hilary Leila Krieger
March 1, 2011
http://www.jpost.com/International/Article.aspx?id=210281

Top US Middle East adviser says uprisings in Egypt, Arab world has lessons for Israel in its relations with the Palestinians.

WASHINGTON – Top US Middle East adviser Dennis Ross said Monday that the uprisings in Egypt and throughout the Arab world had a lesson for Israel in its relations with the Palestinians.

"If Israel can view one lesson from the events in Egypt, it is the danger of getting stuck with an unsustainable status quo," Ross, special assistant to US President Barack Obama on Middle East issues, told J Street's annual conference. "Just as the frustrations in Egypt grew over time, we should all recognize that the conflict with the Palestinians will only become more intractable over time."

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Speaker chastises J Street for opposing US veto at UN
J Street's fragile alternative

He said the administration remained committed to pursuing a peace process between Israel and the Palestinians despite the other crises in the region, but demurred when pressed in a question-andanswer session on whether the US should present a plan to get the parties to take action.

He noted that the US had been undertaking quiet, separate talks with the two parties and, given the current upheaval, was not yet ready to propose bridging ideas or otherwise take definitive action.

"We have to think through carefully what do we do on peace and how it relates to what the focus is on now in the region, the relations between the rulers and ruled," he said. "We'll make a judgment on where the process is and the sides are. That process hasn't played out yet."

Questioned about the Palestinian Authority's appeal to the UN over settlements and other key issues, Ross said the international body was "not the forum" for a peace agreement.

"Unilateral moves aren't going to produce agreements," he said.

Ross received a lukewarm reception from the audience, in contrast to the much warmer reception given to then-national security adviser Jim Jones when he addressed the gathering last year and

told them he believed the Arab-Israeli conflict was the international issue he would most like to solve.

Though Ross is a significantly lower-profile figure than Jones, J Street executive director Jeremy Ben-Ami said he was a fitting choice, considering his role as the top White House Middle East adviser. J Street had requested an administration speaker for its conference, and the decision of whom to send was made by the White House.

Ben-Ami also said the lack of focus in Ross's address on the peace process – he instead emphasized recent events in Egypt, the wider region and Iran rather than J Street's central concerns – didn't indicate any administration shift away from prioritizing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"I would bet that in the coming weeks this returns front and center, even perhaps at a higher priority," he added. "The more that there is freedom and dignity at the center of the Arab world, there is going to be a justifiable question about how that extends to the Palestinians."

The crowd gave a more enthusiastic greeting to several Israeli MKs who appeared on Sunday evening. A total of five went to the conference – Kadima members Nachman Shai, Shlomo Molla, Orit Zuaretz and Yoel Hasson, and Labor's Daniel Ben- Simon. Labor MK Amir Peretz canceled his own participation.

Shai read a statement on behalf of the entire group, calling for Jewish unity and stressing, "You are entitled to answers to the questions that you raise, which are legitimate and important.

The State of Israel and its representatives, official and otherwise, should give them."

But the statement also said that the "dialogue between J Street and Israel – or world Jewry as a whole and Israel – should be run in internal channels, within the Jewish people." Shai also cautioned that he was "not sure if you are aware that there are opinions that are expressed, which are occasionally controversial, within the Israeli internal dialogue that are then used by Israel's enemies against Israel."

Following the public panel, Shai criticized the Israeli embassy for not sending a representative.

Last year, at J Street's first conference, a low-level envoy was sent to observe.

Shai was recently appointed to head a Knesset subcommittee focusing on the challenge of international efforts to delegitimize Israel, and said the matter was deeply pressing for the Israeli government. But co-panelist Ben-Simon dismissed the notion of a global campaign to demonize the country, saying he didn't share the premise that it was a strategic threat to Israel.

"I tend to not trust the honesty of some politicians in Israel, that they say the main enemy is that the world community does not accept us," he said to applause from the audience. He was referring to right-wing leaders in Israel who he suggested were manipulating the issue to suit their political and policy ends.

Ben-Ami expressed a slightly different perspective, saying that "there are people in the world who seek to delegitimize Israel. I do believe that that exists. There are anti-Semites. There are people who hate not only the people but the State of Israel."

But he continued that "those who use that fear to shut down legitimate criticism are making a tremendous mistake."

After the MKs took the stage, Ben-Ami recognized them for "the courage and the leadership that was shown by these five individuals being here today."

Prior to their trip, Shai said 80,000 Kadima members had received phone calls criticizing the party MKs' decision to participate in a conference held by a lobby group seen by many to be working against the interests of Israel. He said his office had received a flood of angry calls after the critical message was sent out, but that he had also received many positive comments after he posted his decision to attend on his Facebook page.

Shai told The Jerusalem Post that despite the criticism, it was important to hear what the group had to say, even if he didn't agree with it all of the time.

"Just as I reject boycotts against Israel, I reject boycotts against any Jewish organization, even if it is controversial," he said.

But Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs Minister Yuli Edelstein took a different view.

Edelstein sent a strongly worded letter to opposition leader Tzipi Livni on Monday, protesting the letter of support she had sent J Street. Livni had wished the organization well in honor of its annual conference and expressed regret that she could not attend.

Edelstein said that J Street was engaged in blatant anti-Israel activity, including lobbying congressmen to support anti-Israel legislation, harming efforts of Israeli diplomats to reach out to college students, and asking the American administration not to veto a UN resolution condemning Israel. He said Livni had made a mistake by allowing Kadima MKs to speak at the conference.

"Taking an active part in a conference whose entire goal is to question Israel's legitimacy and stability crosses a red line that had not been crossed before by a Zionist party," Edelstein wrote Livni. "Your support for your MKs participating in the conference is an endorsement by Kadima of efforts to encourage boycotts of Israel."

The MKs attending the conference said they didn't think there would be any real political price for them to pay, though Ben-Simon thought there was a political cost for those spending the time and effort to oppose their participation.

"Mainly the impact this has is in the effort the Foreign Ministry makes and the energy they spend," he told the Post.

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Jewish Agency: 'Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity' is anti-Zionist
By Gil Shefler
March 2, 2011
http://www.jpost.com/ArtsAndCulture/Entertainment/Article.aspx?id=210414

Group criticizes JAFI's 'privileged status,' seeks amendments to Law of Return.

Jewish groups on Tuesday criticized the Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity movement and organizations that provide it with funding, accusing the newly formed group of opposing the idea of Israel as a Jewish homeland and promoting an anti-Zionist agenda.

The Jewish Agency for Israel said Tuesday it believed Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity had put it on a list of entities that should be "dissolved or fundamentally changed," including the Jewish National Fund and the Israel Lands Administration, because it encouraged Jewish immigration to Israel.

"The Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity movement, to the best of our knowledge, is opposed to kibbutz galuyot: the right of Jews to make their home in Israel," said Haviv Rettig-Gur, the spokesman for JAFI. "If you are opposed to this idea, then in fact you are opposed to the Jewish Agency. We believe the organization that supports this movement, for whatever reason, should be asking itself tough questions."

Avner Inbar, the spokesman for Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity, said its criticism of the organization tasked with Jewish immigration and absorption in Israel was related to the "privileged status" it was given, not to its mission.

"If JAFI were to become an NGO like any other, we'd have no problem with them, but our criticism of them is because they are treated like a branch of government," he said.

At the same time, he said Israeli policy allowing Jews to immigrate freely while denying similar rights to Arabs and Palestinians clashed with his organization's commitment to equality.

"One can infer from our manifesto that changes need to be made to the Law of Return and that those changes need to be done democratically and in the spirit of democratic values," Inbar said, referring to the law that gives people of Jewish ancestry the right to immigrate to Israel. "We have to think whether Jews in Israel should enjoy a right that Arabs don't, and that's an open question."

He said he considered it unacceptable that "any Jewish citizen can invite his aunt to come live here while a Palestinian citizen can't even invite his sister to become a citizen." However, he added, if a Palestinian nation-state existed beside Israel, "then granting Jews unequal rights would be legitimate because then there would be two states, a Jewish one and a Palestinian one."

Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity was formed by Israeli activists who met regularly to protest against Jews moving into the predominantly Arab east Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah. According to the group, such actions represent a violation of international law and undermine prospects of reaching a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

While the scope of its activities was initially limited to the question of Jewish settlement in east Jerusalem, the manifesto it put out last week represents an attempt to broaden its influence and break out into the national political arena.

One of the main claims against the movement is that it believes Israel discriminates against Arabs and Palestinians in a way similar to white-minority rule in South Africa. Asked to clarify the group's position on the matter, Inbar said it was "concerned by the rise of fascism and racism in Israeli society and the possibility that Israel shall become an apartheid state, if it hasn't already turned into one."

Meanwhile, watchdog group NGO Monitor criticized the New Israel Fund for funding Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity, and J Street for honoring one of the movement's key activists, Sara Benninga, at its conference in Washington.

"The New Israeli Fund claims to love Israel and to oppose boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS)," said Prof. Gerald Steinberg, president of NGO Monitor. "But at the same time, NIF also provides funding to a group that campaigns for the 'liquidation' of organizations such as the Jewish Agency and Jewish National Fund."

He added that "one of the NIF's new funding guidelines states that funding will not go to groups that 'promote anti-democratic values.' NIF must end the secret funding processes and publicly disclose how they see funding of the Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity movement as contributing to coexistence and mutual understanding."

However, Jeremy Ben-Ami, the founder of J-Street, rejected NGO Monitor's criticism and went on the offensive.

"Efforts by NGO Monitor and others on the far Right of Jewish life to deny those whose views they don't like the right to express themselves are pursuing a dangerous and highly un-Jewish course of action," he said. "J Street disagrees with some of the words chosen by some who spoke at our conference – just as we share concerns of Israeli leaders like [Defense Minister] Ehud Barak, who have used the word 'apartheid' to describe the future Israel faces without a two-state solution."

The NIF also rejected NGO Monitor's claims, defending its support for the activities of Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity.

"NIF, alongside many intellectuals and public figures in Israel, recognizes the importance of the work of the Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity movement, which bravely acts against the injustice caused by the occupation and the undermining of basic human rights of Arabs in east Jerusalem and other places in Israel," the NIF told The Jerusalem Post.

“In fighting the illegal and unjust dispossession of Arab families in east Jerusalem by the extreme settler movement, the Sheikh Jarrah protesters call attention to the struggle against discrimination, inequality and anti-democratic efforts in Israel,” it said.

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Knesset c'tee to hold meeting on J Street activities
By Rebecca Anna Stoil
March 9, 2011
http://www.jpost.com/International/Article.aspx?ID=211483&R=R1

Kadima MK: "The fact that J Street fought against sanctions that the US wants to place on Iran is very, very serious in my eyes."

The Knesset's Immigration, Absorption and Public Diplomacy Committee will hold a hearing on the activities of left-wing American lobby J Street as early as next week, committee chairman Danny Danon (Likud) said Wednesday.

The Knesset plenum voted Wednesday in favor of holding a hearing on the group's activities at the conclusion of a debate on the subject sponsored by MK Otniel Schneller (Kadima).

Danon said that he plans to invite the MKs who participated in the J Street annual conference in late February, as well as Kadima chairwoman Tzipi Livni, to testify before the committee.

"What really interests me are the mutual relations between the Jewish world and the State of Israel," Schneller said, explaining why he brought the topic up for formal debate in the plenum.

"The code that was broken is more serious than the content.

"The fact that J Street fought against the sanctions that the United States wants to place against Iran is very, very serious in my eyes, as is the fact that they acted against the American veto," he said.

Schneller said that "if they say that if Israel accepts our radical left-wing diplomatic positions, then we love Israel – it is a conditional love. If you don't accept our ideas, then we will support Iran or the Palestinian Authority. I don't want love like that. Don't love me at all.

"I asked for the hearing not because of the content of J Street's beliefs, but because I want to look into the commitment of Jewish love and support for Israel. If they don't love and support Israel, then they should not present themselves as pro-Israel," Schneller said.

"American Jewish groups, Right or Left, should understand that they should maintain full solidarity for Israel overseas – and when Tzipi Livni or Haim Oron become prime minister, I will demand the same loyalty from right-wing groups."

Schneller noted that "it is particularly frustrating because J Street does good things as well – they work on campuses, and some of its members are really Zionists."

Schneller, however, was moderate in his comments in comparison to MK Nissim Ze'ev (Shas), who blasted the organization from the speaker's podium.

"Their sheer hatred toward the State of Israel and the government's policies is more terrible than that of Israel's worst enemies," he said.

Most of Schneller's Kadima cohorts, some of whom attended the recent J Street conference, were intentionally absent during the plenum discussion and vote on the subject.

HAARETZ

In Israel, the revolution has already begun

By Bradley Burston

February 23, 2011

http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/a-special-place-in-hell/in-israel-the-revolution-has-already-begun-1.345239

This new revolution aims not only at the end of occupation, but at the beginning of a new Israel. Not for settlers, this time, but for Israelis.

People often ask why, at a time when revolutionary fervor has seized nation after nation here in the Middle East, no revolt has yet begun in my country.

Actually, it has. Right under the government's nose.

From the outside, it may well appear that nothing has changed: a small but strategic principality which has been ruled for decades by a self-declared aristocracy, few in number, fierce in influence, fundamentalist in outlook, increasingly non-democratic in governance.

Although technically and by blood one of the princes, the nominal prime minister is, in essence, a figurehead. Under pressure from the West to extend self-determination to minority regions, he knows that were he to agree to renounce sovereignty over these areas, he would be risking a bullet to his back.

For a while, the prime minister speaks of reforms, of a U.S.-backed vision of independence for the minority regions. But only for a while. Mindful of the well-armed 4 percent of the population which so often calls the shots for the other 96, he even risks the close relationship with the United States for the sake of the aristocracy, which lives in army-guarded estates away from view, beyond the borders of the general population.

The reforms fade as he speaks of the dark designs of regional foes, while his guileful chief coalition partner, the burly, corruption-shadowed grand vizier, a rival for the political affection of the aristocracy, exploits long-simmering hatreds to push for a broad range of curbs on democratic freedoms.

Yes, to the outside world, the button-down façade of stability seems assured. The country's general population supports major reforms, but has been traumatized into paralysis by years of bloodshed and a sclerotic political system dominated by corrupt, theocratic and rigidly conservative interest groups.

Outside of the established political mechanisms, however, a revolution is underway. Here, of all places. In the modern principality of the Jewish People. In Israel.

Over the years, the settlement aristocracy – the plaid-flannel power behind the throne - has aged, losing political steam and internal direction, as its own youth have begun to question its ideology of divine right to land and rule.

Here, now, on this side of the recognized border, a potent opposition is emerging, young, largely unknown, social network-savvy.

This revolution, like that of the settlers decades ago, has the potential of transforming both Israel and Judaism as a whole.

That is why the anti-compromise, pro-settlement right correctly sees NGOs, human rights organizations, and their pro-social justice supporters abroad, as the most pressing and immediate of threats. This is where the right is investing its legislative energy. But it is not the future of a democratic and Jewish Israel that these activists threaten. It is the dominance of the emirate archipelago of the settlements that they truly endanger.

The activists have a secret that the government has been thus far unable to combat. They have discovered a way to bring the bloated giants that run government institutions, to their knees:

Hidden from view by the giants' bulk, they locate sores and bunions and gout on the giants' overtaxed feet, and then, simply, stomp.

They find specific, vulnerable, potentially painful lesions, and they press down. And it works. The giant finds itself incapacitated.

The targets: some of the country's most powerful giants. Two examples among many:

1. Sheikh Jarrah, the dinky, makeshift, brilliant demonstration that materializes every Friday afternoon in East Jerusalem and which has bedeviled the settlement movement, Jerusalem's defiantly pro-settlement Mayor Nir Barkat, and the even more defiant, even more pro-settlement Jerusalem Regional Planning Commission.

2. El Araqib, the tiny Negev Bedouin village which the Jewish National Fund, aided by the Israel Lands Authority and more than a thousand police, have repeatedly demolished – 18 times at last count - in order to clear the way for a generous (to the JNF) Evangelical Christian group's God TV Forest. The Bedouin residents, supported by human rights activists and other NGOs, have returned to rebuild every time the JNF and ILA heavy machinery has rolled in to flatten their village.

This is what a revolution sounds like: The princes are in disarray. Some of the blood princes and princesses, like Tzipi Livni and Dan Meridor, heirs to commanders of the pre-state Irgun militia, now openly believe in and are working for a two-state solution, an independent Palestine alongside Israel, a major Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank.

Everywhere you look, if you look close, change is in the wind.

The very activists whom pro-occupation Israel sees as its worst enemies – Peace Now, the many grant recipients of the New Israel Fund such as the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, as well as a host of independent groups, are gumming up the works of occupation simply by shining light on it.

British novelist Ian McEwan, accepting on Sunday the Jerusalem Prize for Literature, spoke of "the continued evictions and demolitions, and relentless purchases of Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem, the process of right of return granted to Jews but not Arabs."

He also marked the occasion by donating $10,000 to an important NGO, Combatants for Peace, an organization, his website noted, "that brings together Israeli ex-soldiers and Palestinian ex-fighters. These ex-combatants go about in pairs, talking in public to make the case that there can be no military solution to the conflict."

Just as the settlement revolution has long energized and been supported by Jewish groups abroad, this new revolution for a socially just Israel has already brought change and new energy to the largest of Diaspora communities.

Although effectively boycotted by Israel's American-born Ambassador to Washington Michael Oren, and by the recent General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America, J Street's 2011 Conference (February 26-March 1) seems likely to live up to its billing of its "largest-ever gathering of pro-Israel pro-peace activists."

On March 14, across the States in Berkeley, Tikkun Magazine, which has no hesitation in describing itself as "strongly pro-Israel" alongside a progressive, critical perspective, will be marking its 25th anniversary. Among the honorees that night will be Judge Richard Goldstone.

This revolution has only begun, but it is gaining traction by the day. Over the past several days alone, it has been bolstered by the appointment of Israel's first openly gay judge, a disastrous setback for settler-driven McCarthyite legislation, and a grind to a halt for construction in the flashpoint settlement of Har Homa.

This revolution has only now begun. It will be waged in cyberspace and in city streets, in occupied areas and in Israel proper, in American synagogues and, in the end, the entire Jewish world. This revolution aims not only at the end of occupation, but at the beginning of a new Israel. Not for settlers, this time. For Israelis.

HAARETZ

Either Democracy – or Hebron
By Carlo Strenger
February 25, 2011
http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/strenger-than-fiction/either-democracy-or-hebron-1.345693

Liberal Zionists do not think that Israel's raison d'être hinges on Hebron, but being recognized by internationally law and giving millions of people, most of them, but certainly not all, Jewish, the home in which they can live and realize their potential.

Israel's right-wing, time and again, claims a monopoly for the Zionist idea: In a recent article, Moshe Arens claims that those who are against schools taking students to Hebron have lost their roots in the land of Israel because the foundation of Zionism, has always been the return of the Jewish people to the land of its forefathers. Therefore, he argues, establishing a Palestinian state that would include some of Judaism's most sacred places undermines the entire Zionist idea. To put it in a nutshell: For Arens, Zionism without Hebron is dead.

We should be grateful to Arens' measured and lucid presentation of his point of view, because this allows for a badly needed clarification. Moshe Arens simply distorts history in saying that the idea of Jewish sovereignty over the historical land of Israel is the only form Zionism has taken. While he may not like their views, it would be difficult to kick Herzl, Ahad Ha'am and Yehuda Magnes out of the history of Zionism.

Herzl's Zionism was political, pragmatic and liberal. He wanted Jews to have a homeland, and in some phases of his Zionist activity, he was perfectly willing to consider the option of a Jewish homeland other than historical Judea. Ahad Ha'am, one of the luminaries of Zionist thought, thought that the Jewish people needed a spiritual revival. He saw the Yishuv as the seed for a cultural center of the Jewish people, and saw no need for a Jewish state, and so did Yehuda Magnes.

In the end, Israel was founded as an independent state. It's flourishing is a great historical achievement that has changed Jewish self-consciousness immeasurably.

But none of this is connected to the West Bank in general or Hebron in particular. The opposite is true. I know Moshe Arens as a genuine liberal and a genuine champion of human rights, including those of Israel's Arab minority. Therefore it is difficult for me to understand his blindness to the results of more than four decades of occupation. I am sure that Arens is no less appalled by the recent wave of racism and anti-democratic legislation in the Knesset; and he is certainly no less opposed than I am to the theological justification of the superiority of the Jewish race that have lately been stated in halakhic rulings that create shame and revulsion in most Jews, religious and secular, in the world.

But Arens continues to hang on to the dangerous illusion that holding on to the West Bank is consistent with democracy, and perpetuates the myth that there is no Zionism without Hebron. The warnings of those in the right-wing that if Israel stops insisting on its historical right to all

the land west of Jordan means Israel's end is a tired cliché that has nothing to do with either Realpolitik or international law, in which ancient Jewish history plays no role whatsoever. The international justification of Israel's existence is not the house of David, the first or the second Temple, but a working democracy that respects human rights.

As opposed to Arens, liberal Zionists do not think that Israel's raison d'être hinges on Hebron, but being recognized by internationally law and giving millions of people, most of them, but certainly not all, Jewish, the home in which they can live and realize their potential. To be a free people in our country means that we live in a state that respects the rights of all; there are no compromises in this matter.

While many of us have strong feelings for Hebron, we must balance the importance of these feelings with the truly crucial value of Israel's democratic character. What truly matters is not the past; it is the present, and the future. No piece of land is holier than human life.

Liberal Zionism is making a comeback. It is a forward-looking vision based on human flourishing, and on universal ethical principles that are also embodied in Judaism. It is expressed in the convention of J Street that is beginning today, and in the European movement of J Call. Its message is simple; its morals unequivocal: In terms of international law, Hebron does not belong to Israel. In terms of human rights, Israel's occupation of the West Bank is unacceptable. Along with the rest of Israel's right, Arens needs to come to terms with the truth: It is either Hebron and the racism that goes along with it, or democracy and international legitimacy. You cannot have both.

HAARETZ

J Street president: We criticize Israel's policies but believe in its right to exist

By Natasha Mozgovaya
February 27, 2011
http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/focus-u-s-a/j-street-president-we-criticize-israel-s-policies-but-believe-in-its-right-to-exist-1.346074

Leftist Pro-Israel lobby group J Street held its second annual conference in Washington DC; The group has sparked much controversy for opposing the U.S. veto of the UN Security Council resolution condemning the settlements

President of leftist pro-Israel lobby group J Street, Jeremy Ben Ami, was ecstatic to see the large turnout at the group's second annual conference in Washington DC, though disappointed that the Israeli Embassy did not send a representative.

"I think the sight of so many people in one place is so energizing," Ben Ami told Haaretz, "our voices are starting to be heard; it's thrilling and exciting and motivating for the activists."

How can you view this as such a success if the Israeli Embassy did not send a representative to the conference?

"I think Israel's ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren made an enormous mistake by not attending the conference."

"I understand that J Street does not agree with the government of Israel on a number of policy matters, but to meet only with the people that you agree with is not the way you conduct diplomacy and not the way the Ambassador of the State of Israel should relate to the US Jewish community."

The U.S. administration vetoed the UN Security Council resolution that condemned settlements. You were against the veto. Do you regret this opposition in light of criticism claiming J Street is out of synch with the government's position?

"Our position was to do everything possible to avoid the UN Security Council vote altogether. That was our first call and the Obama administration tried to do it. They tried to convince the Palestinians and to find an alternative [to the vote]. They were in a very difficult position and they tried to avoid casting the veto."

"It's not in America's interest [to veto the resolution]. I understand the Israelis, the veto is not helpful to them, but Israel has to understand what this costs America. At times there is not enough appreciation in Israel for how much America risks to protect Israel in the UN at every turn."

Still, any second thoughts about J Street's position?

"This was not an easy decision. Politically this was very problematic, and there are definitely strong arguments against it. There was a strong case to be made that there are a whole lot of ways for the US to convey to Israel just how deeply current status quo undercuts American and Israeli interests. But we stand by the decision; we understand it wasn't popular, but we think it was the right one. As David [Saperstein] said tonight, sometimes we make decisions that are not going to be easy or popular. And we will accept the consequences, because we stand by what we believe in."

J Street emphasizes the importance of working with students. Have you done this to make up for the difficulties you have encountered in working with the Congress, largely due to AIPAC opposition?

"We are making huge progress on Capital Hill. In the 2008 elections our political action committee ended up with 29 members of Congress we had endorsed. In this Congress, although we've lost Gary Ackerman, we still have 44 – 50 percent more members of Congress, and I think there will be an increase in 2012."

"We will continue to grow, because this is the way of the future in the Jewish community – this is where the majority of younger liberal Jews are. And this is where the Members of Congress will be too."

Any plans for the 2012 presidential elections?

"We'll certainly defend President Obama when he runs for reelection, because we think he is a true friend of Israel. I don't think our political arm will endorse a presidential candidate. We will do what we did in 2008 when we had a whole website defending the future president against the lies and slurs that are so common in right wing politics. Those lies are still out there and they'll come up again. We will be there to make sure there is correct information to counter it."

But sometimes it seems as though you need to focus your energies on protecting yourselves, especially in light of all the criticism against your policies.

"Absolutely, but in some sense it's all the same small group of people on the far right who are making claims like 'the president is Muslim' or 'he is manipulated by Iranians or Saudis'. There has to be sunshine behind these anonymous websites. People now know who funds us – the question now is, who funds these smear campaigns. Who is putting the money, the millions of dollars, in campaigns to smear the president, and the hundreds of thousands to smear us?"

Once the secret Soros donations to J Street were exposed, did you start filtering your donations in any way?

"There is nothing wrong with anyone who funds J Street. We are very proud to receive the support of George Soros. The only impact that this exposure has had on us is that George Soros increased his funding, which is just fine with us. We actually think he represents the values that we are speaking about at the conference."

"[As far as allegations that J Street receives Iranian and Saudi funding] We don't know any of the sources [of the allegations]. 'Makor Rishon' had a headline claiming we receive Iranian and Saudi funding. I asked them to offer even shred of evidence; there is no Iranian or Saudi funding in J Street, and I wonder how this information found its way to the front page of a newspaper…"

Some say that the Jewish community shouldn't be too vocal in its praise of the revolutions in the Arab world, lest they later become the center of some conspiracy. What do you think?

"The world is moving towards a more democratic form of government, and it will only happen over time. It's important that we as an American Jewish community, as well as Israelis, be in line with the hopes and the aspirations of these people. Security, good jobs, a good future for their kids; that's what they are fighting for, that's the reason they are in the streets and it has nothing to do with us."

"If we express our support for their hopes and dreams, in the end it will be good for us and Israel and the US Jewish community."

Is it good for the peace process?

"Perhaps the more the situation in the Arab world causes people to question where things are headed in the future, it will open up people's eyes, and this unrest will actually cause people to say: 'Let's take this chance before it's too late'. "

At the conference, Peter Beinart said that Israel can't be holy in the days of Bibi, Lieberman and Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. Do you agree with this?

"To the extent that values of Judaism would argue for inclusive treatment of minorities, appropriate treatment of women, an end to the way in which the Palestinians are treated – yes, what is happening today is not in keeping with our Jewish values. So yes, I do believe he is correct."

There is a claim that J Street's activities cause harm to Israel. Do you think that it's correct, even if it's unintentional?

"That's a very general charge. In what way?"

Israel's image, for example. De-legitimization of Israel.

"It is so important to draw the line between what is criticism of policy – that's what we do – and questioning the Israel's right to exist. There is no question J Street stands for Israel's right to exist. This is a fundamentally Zionist, pro-Israeli organization that believes that Israel has the right to exist as the home of the Jewish people. So anything else is criticism of policy."

"We don't contribute in the slightest to the de-legitimization of Israel. And I would argue that in the end, what will lead to greater problems in Israel, is confusing criticism of policy with true de-legitimization."

On Tuesday, the conference participants will lobby Congress members on Capitol Hill, with one of the main themes being the preservation of foreign aid to Israel and the Palestinians.

The gathering on the hill was inspired by a letter to President Obama, initiated by the Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky, which called on the administration to prevent reductions in foreign aid 'that advance US interests in the Middle East', further calling on him 'forestall efforts to separate aid for Israel from other assistance'.

HAARETZ

J Street kicks off annual conference amid UN settlement resolution controversy

By Natasha Mozgovaya
February 27, 2011
http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/j-street-kicks-off-annual-conference-amid-un-settlement-resolution-controversy-1.345960?localLinksEnabled=false

Speaking at Washington conference, left-wing lobby leader Jeremy Ben-Ami says that the time has come for Israel to choose: to remain Jewish, to be democratic, or to keep hold on settlements.

The leftist pro-Israeli lobby J Street kicked off its second annual conference in the Washington Convention Center on Saturday night, with over 2,000 participants in attendance, including about 500 students.

The event was preceded by controversy following J Street's call to the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama not to veto the UN Security Council resolution condemning the settlements construction.

However, Washington did veto the resolution, while issuing strong rebuke of Israel's settlement policy, making clear the decision was made out of conviction that the resolution would only harm the peace process by leading each side to fortify their positions.

Dennis Ross, the U.S. president's special aide, is scheduled to address the conference on Monday.

Ahead of the conference, Noah Pollak, Executive Director of the Emergency Committee for Israel, wrote a letter addressed to Ross, saying that he was surprised that the presidential aide agreed to appear at the event.

"Speaking before a group that has worked diligently over the past three years to become a voice for weakening the U.S.-Israel alliance, for pressuring Israel to accept policies that Israeli voters have rejected as dangerous, and perhaps most important, for giving Jewish support to a global campaign of delegitimization directed against Israel and Zionism," he wrote.

Pollak went on to ask Ross: "Will you challenge those who seek to brand nearly every Israeli security measure a war crime? Will you take on the inventors and proponents of so many false claims about Israel? Will you repudiate the Goldstone Report?"

The Israeli Embassy in Washington will not be sending neither speaker nor representative to this year's conference, stressing to Haaretz, however, that the dialogue will continue despite the differences between J Street positions and the Israeli government positions.

Several Knesset members from both the Kadima and Labor parties attended the conference.

Rabbi David Saperstein from the Reform movement in his opening remarks stressed that a two state solution was the only solution for Mideast peace, adding that "there is so much J Street stands for."

"You matter politically," he said to the applause of the participants. He criticized the settlements and said that "anti deligitimization [of Israel] campaign can succeed only if we have wall to wall support."

J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami said: "We reaffirm our commitment to the people and state of Israel. We believe that the Jewish people have the right to a state of their own." "We value and share democratic values on which the country was founded."

"We realize that Israel has real enemies. We are profoundly and unapologetically pro-Israeli," Ben-Ami said, adding that his group believes "that the future of the state of Israel depends on the two-state solution. The time has come for Israel to choose: to remain Jewish, to be democratic, or to maintain all the land between Mediterranean and the Jordan. You can have only two."

"Israeli supporters have the right and obligation to speak out," he added.

"We believe that debate on Israel is good for the Jewish community. It stirs strong emotions, but it's not something we can't handle. Not only the status quo in the Arab world has changed – but the status quo between Israel and the Palestinians has to change," Ben-Ami said.

Moriel Rothman, J Street U board President, said: "I love Israel but I do not love the war in Gaza. I love Israel, but I do not love its treatment of minorities. I love Israel, but I do not love the occupation of the Palestinian land."

Three guests were honored at the opening plenary session: the author Peter Beinart, who caused a vigorous debate last year with his article about the relationship between Israel and the young U.S. Jews; Sara Benninga, an Israeli activist from the Sheikh Jarrah solidarity movement; and the Palestinian physician Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, who lost his three daughters in January 2009, and established "Daughters for Life" foundation.

In his speech, Peter Beinart said that "Israel cannot be holy in the time of Bibi, Lieberman and Ovadia Yosef."

Sara Benninga said in her speech: "Our critics portray us as enemies of the Jewish State. But it is ironic that a country claiming to be the victim of a campaign of delegitimization, shamelessly delegitimizes sections of its own citizenry. We reject the false dichotomy between security and democracy."

"We refuse to settle for anything less than a true end of occupation that is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for realizing our goal of substantive equality and genuine democracy in Israel. We know that true friends do not reinforce your weaknesses, but bring out the best in you," she said.

"We see the same story unfolding here in the United States, where an outdated Jewish Establishment vilifies those in the Jewish community who dare to criticize Israel's policies. This is why J Street is such a ground breaking organization, and why I am so proud to receive this honor tonight," Benninga added.

Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, who lost his three daughters in January 2009, and established "Daughters for life" foundation said, "I am moved and proud to be with you at this hopeful event. If only my daughters could come out of their grave and see that their blood wasn't in vain."

"We need to live the human values. As a Muslim I swore to God and to my daughters not to rest, because I will meet them one day, and I want to bring them the gift – to bring justice. To solve our problems peacefully we have to change our course." Abuelaish said.

"Our enemies are greed, ignorance and that we don't know each other. I truly believe that political solution of the conflicts is based on mutual recognition and two states for the two peoples." She said that one cannot be pro-Israeli without being pro-Palestinian.

After the frustrations of Oslo it is tempting to give up, said Abuelaish. "But giving up peace is not the answer. I believe in you. Have hope, have faith, but take action."

HAARETZ

Dennis Ross at J Street: Extremists must not benefit from protests in the Arab world
By Natasha Mozgovaya
February 28, 2011
http://www.haaretz.com/news/international/dennis-ross-at-j-street-extremists-must-not-benefit-from-protests-in-the-arab-world-1.346266

Ross dedicated most of his speech to Iran and the Middle East; assuring that security ties with Israel have never been stronger and they Obama administration is monitoring Iran.

U.S. President Barack Obama's special assistant, Dennis Ross, said Monday that Washington was concerned about the uprising in the Arab world, but remained dedicated to the Israel-Palestinian peace process and Iran's nuclear efforts.

Ross opened his address on the third day of the J Street's annual conference in Washington by discussing the Obama administration's concern regarding the revolutions in the Arab countries, particularly with regard to the challenge they posed to cMiddle East peace.

“Change in Egypt has created concern for many in the region; Egypt has been a pillar for Israel’s pursuit of peace. The last thing we want to see is extremists benefit from the situation," he said, adding that with regards to Israel "it’s the interest of Egypt that the peace becomes warmer, not colder."

Changing the topic to Israel, Ross stressed that one of the Obama administration's principles was “an unshakeable commitment to Israel’s security.”

He spoke about U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen's recent visit to the region, and said that the level of the security cooperation between the two countries has never been stronger.

"There are a number of clocks ticking. There is a demographic clock that all of you are aware of; there are also biological clocks of young leaders emerging – you want them to believe a solution is a possibility, not an impossibility," Ross said.

Asked about the possibility of the new American initiative, Ross said “we have to think through carefully what do we do on peace and how it relates to what the focus is on now in the region the relations between the rulers and ruled. We’ll make a judgment on where the process is and the sides are, the status quo is unsustainable."

He also referred to Iran, saying that "we will keep an eye on Iran and the pressure on. While the door will always remain open for diplomacy, but we remain determined to prevent Iran from acquiring the nuclear weapons and we won’t be deflected from this goal."

It was a very careful speech, reiterating statements previously made by Obama's administration regarding the Middle East. His address was greeted with surprising applause from the J Street crowd, known to be critical of Israel's policies.

Ross’s speech was followed by a panel discussion that made fun of Ross’s departure right after the speech.

Daniel Levy from the New America Foundation criticized Ross for offering few specifics.

New York Times columnist Roger Cohen added his own rebuke, saying: “He sat in five administrations but couldn’t sit after the speech for the debate.”

With regard to Ross' remarks, Cohen said: “When I hear the word process, I am dying inside, there is no process and there is no peace," he added.

HAARETZ

Israel will have to deal with J Street sooner or later

By Natasha Mozgovaya

March 1, 2011

http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/features/capitol-letter-better-a-doorway-than-a-lobby-1.346373

Despite growth in number of participants at J Street's annual conference, it failed to bring in any big gun speakers like Netanyahu or Clinton; the Israeli Embassy skipped the conference altogether.

Aaron Weinberg, a 20-year-old freshman at Brandeis, stood up Saturday night with others to clap for Peter Beinart, one of the three people honored at J Street's national conference in Washington, when Beinart remarked that "Israel cannot be holy in the days of Bibi, Lieberman and Rabbi Ovadia." "There is no kedusha in Netanyahu's and Lieberman's conduct with peace process, and there is no kedusha in Rabbi Ovadia's monopoly on who is a Jew and his lack of engagement," agreed Weinberg, using the Hebrew word for holiness.

"When I was in high school, everyday I was coming home and telling my mom that I wanted to go to the airport, to make aliyah. I was making friends only with those who spoke Hebrew. But frankly, I feel very disenfranchised by the Israeli government and Israeli public voting for such a government. I think I would feel pretty uncomfortable to live with a group that holds such views," he said, explaining why he is still today in the U.S.

But Weinberg couldn't help caring about Israel, so a week after he went to college, he found J Street representatives at the campus and became active. This week, he spoke before over 2,000 people who attended the conference - and he feels empowered.

"I am a son of two Jewish educators, I was always involved with Jewish life, but I never felt there is a place for me to be true to my values," he told me. "There was no place to criticize Israeli policies and be productive. The view in the U.S. Jewish community is that Israel is invincible, we must defend it without preconditions. But I didn't want to join the other side, because I do feel connected to Israel, I even spent a year in Jerusalem."

He had his share of criticism towards some of J Street's decisions - he defines its recent call for the U.S. Administration to refrain from casting a veto against the UN Security Council resolution condemning settlements construction as "courageous, but strategically stupid."

"They can be right and moral, but they won't win over more Jews," he said. "Maybe they should have stopped at the call for the administration to make anything possible to prevent this vote. And not to push further."

J Street's second annual conference was held in the Washington Convention Center - an upgrade signaling the still-young group's seriousness. But unlike conferences of the America-Israel

Public Action Committee, there was no heavy security and indeed no big guns like U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton or Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to protect.

Despite the growth in the numbers of participants this year, at the huge center there was still enough room for a parallel video game conference and another gathering. The Israeli Embassy decided to skip the conference altogether.

J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami said Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren, in his opinion, "made an enormous mistake" by not attending, and that "to meet only with the people that you agree with is not the way you conduct diplomacy and not the way the ambassador of the State of Israel should relate to the U.S. Jewish community."

The shaky position of J-Street vis-a-vis the Israeli public was stressed when Ben-Ami, following a panel with five Kadima and Labor MKs, asked the audience to raise and applaud, to recognize "the incredible courage and leadership it took them to be here with us."

The Palestinians evidently had their own troubles - Mustafa Barghouti, a member of the Palestinian parliament, that was supposed to speak about Hamas, didn't come amid the sensitive political overtures the Palestinian Authority was making toward the militant group.

"It feels strange," said Kadima MK Nachman Shai, who admitted that he hesitated whether to cancel his participation following the UN Security Council resolution controversy.

"I was in many conferences of U.S. Jews - and there were always panels about social issues, poverty and philanthropy and aliyah, trying to push the political issues aside. And here you've got over 2,000 people, many young people, who are discussing the core political problems of Israel. I think it was a big mistake for the Israeli Embassy to shun this conference. Over 2,000 people, it's a serious event - how can you miss an opportunity to address them? I am really impressed by these young people, who are striving to know more, to be involved - while the Jewish Federations are strug gling to keep young people involved. I didn't agree with many things they said and made my opinion clear, but it was very refreshing."

It seems there was no reason for the Israeli diplomats to skip the conference. The reaction to Dennis Ross' speech, void of any specifics, was a good indicator of the fact that the public was not anti-Israel.

He got applause when he stressed the Obama administration's "unshakeable commitment to Israel's security"; the "unprecedented level of military cooperation," and vowed that "we remain determined to prevent Iran from acquiring the nuclear weapons and we won't be deflected from this goal."

It could be the same reaction he would garner at any AIPAC gathering.

The problem with J Street is that it seems to have lost a bit of its policy focus, instead plunging into controversies and acting, as some Congress staffers hint, too hastily and even arrogantly. They point to the lobby's practice of putting out controversial statements without consulting

enough with key players, making some congressmen sympathetic to a two-state solution feel uncomfortable.

But it was much more successful on the grassroots level, bringing to the conference over 500 students from 128 universities. The students were a vivid reminder that there is a need for a left-leaning alternative within the Jewish community.

It will be difficult for J Street to give up its focus as a Congressional lobby, but at this moment it seems it's more productive for them to explore their potential as a national or even international grassroots Jewish peace organization.

The conference featured some inspiring and many times witty talk. The Egyptian author Mona Eltahawy reminded the audience of the need for direct contact with the Arab public and called on them to "stop being narcissistic - not everything is about Israel, for a change it's about us," she said, referring to the upheavals in the Arab world.

Lara Friedman from Americans for Peace Now said she doesn't care if President Obama puts down a plan or parameters or a grocery list, but there's got to be action at this point, not another great speech.

The Palestinian doctor who lost his daughters in Gaza also spoke, and a young Gazan woman whose family belongs to Fatah confronted Shai on the verge of tears, respectfully stating that she disagrees with his views about the siege on Gaza.

The discussions were serious, the young participants were hungry for information. Even if Israel's government chose to see J Street as an irrelevant, annoying, pretentious organization - they will have to deal with those young people who identify with it.

HAARETZ

Lieberman, Netanyahu and the delegitimization of J Street
By Akiva Eldar
March 3, 2011
http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/features/lieberman-netanyahu-and-the-delegitimization-of-j-street-1.346374

Liberal British Jews say every time they criticize Israeli government policy, the embassy and the Jewish establishment accuse them of betrayal.

What would happen if the Nobel Peace Prize Committee decided to award the prize this year to, for example, veteran peace activist Uri Avnery? (He deserves it!) Judging by the boycott the Israeli Embassy in Washington has imposed on the J Street Conference, the chair intended for the Israeli ambassador at the ceremony in Oslo would remain empty.

From reading the cries of protest accompanying the Knesset members who accepted the invitation from J Street, we can conclude that Israel would not send an official representative to congratulate the Nobel laureate. How can one legitimize a Jew who is not ashamed to call for the delegitimization of the settlements?

Here, a boycott of a strictly kosher wine from the Mount Hebron wineries is illegitimate. But a boycott of someone who says a product made in occupied territory is blatantly nonkosher is strictly legitimate. The play "Gevalt, They're Delegitimizing Us," directed by settler-Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, assisted by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is succeeding beyond all expectations.

Act I: Netanyahu delivers a "dramatic" speech in which he says he desires nothing more than to leave the territories and hand them over to a Palestinian state.

Act II: In a speech at the UN General Assembly, Lieberman announces that there is not the shadow of a chance for a diplomatic agreement in our generation, so we have to see to the (natural, of course) increase of the settlers.

Act III: Throughout the world they blame Israel for causing the negotiations with the Palestinians to fail, and they condemn its refusal to freeze construction in the settlements. Also, left-wing groups and a handful of MKs join the protest, and the Arabs ask the United Nations to condemn Israel.

Act IV: Netanyahu makes a series of whining speeches about the delegitimization efforts against the Jewish state. Lieberman tells the Israeli ambassadors that henceforth any criticism of the government's policy, the settlements or the occupation will be considered delegitimization of Israel in a time of war. If the criticism is voiced by a member of our people, he will be considered a "self-hating Jew" and a collaborator with Israel-haters during a delegitimization campaign. Lieberman appends a quotation from Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who is called

"Yitzhak Rabin's successor," warning that this campaign is "no less serious than the danger from Hamas and Hezbollah."

Act V: Jewish members of Congress break off relations with J Street and other organizations that dared to ask President Barack Obama to refrain from vetoing the Arab proposal for a resolution to condemn the settlements. MKs from Kadima - which for some reason is considered the leftist alternative to Likud - send their invitations to the conference back to J Street. Some of them join the spokespeople of the right and attack their colleagues - MKs Nachman Shai, Yoel Hasson and Shlomo Molla - who have agreed to be guests at the conference of an organization that upholds two states for two peoples.

Kadima MK Otniel Schneller declares: "Participation in the conference of a pro-Palestinian Jewish organization that undermines Israel's interests is like an act of sabotage against the state." Shai Hermesh, Kadima's kibbutznik, fulminates against his colleagues who, he says, don't understand the danger inherent in supporting an organization that acts against Israel. Kadima's newest MK, Zeev Bielski, a former chairman of the Jewish Agency, tells reporters that his colleagues who have gone to Washington don't understand what serious damage J Street is inflicting on Israel.

It's no wonder Jewish peace organizations around the world have been reporting hesitation about joining protest activities against the settlements or even signing petitions supporting peace negotiations. In meetings with liberal Jews in London two weeks ago, I repeatedly heard variations of the sentence: "Every time we dare to criticize the government's policy, not heaven forbid Israel, the embassy and the Jewish establishment and press accuse us of disloyalty or betrayal of our people."

Many, if not all, of them are keeping their criticism to themselves, to the greater glory of the unity of Israel. The Chinese authorities protested against the Nobel committee for giving the prize to Liu Xiaobo, who is serving 11 years in prison for "subversion" - i.e., protesting against the suppression of civil rights. And in Israel, Jonathan Pollak, who demonstrated on his bicycle against the siege on Gaza, has been sent to prison for "interfering with traffic." Peace activists who win respect and awards abroad are accused of subversion against the state.

Coffee with Gadhafi

It isn't only Israeli Arabs who have had the pleasure of Gadhafi's company. Not the king of kings Muammar Gadhafi himself, but his "successful" son Saif al-Islam, now serving as the notorious murderer's character witness.

In August 2003, the younger Gadhafi was invited to one of the closed meetings the University of California and Greek government hold regularly in Athens. Representatives take part from Israel, Arab countries and Iran, along with experts from the United States and Europe.

The knowledge that Israelis, among them a senior MK from the coalition, diplomats, academics and even journalists were sitting in the audience didn't deter the man considered the Libyan crown prince. He expressed doubts about the chances of Israel and the Palestinians agreeing to

partition the land, and adopted the brand name "Isratine" his father had attached to the idea of a binational state.

The Israelis were impressed by the eloquence of the younger Gadhafi, who at that time was a doctoral student at the London School of Economics. Papa Gadhafi's dubious reputation didn't deter the prestigious academic institution from accepting hundreds of thousands of British pounds from the Gadhafi Foundation and from giving legitimacy to the Libyan crime family.

HAARETZ

U.S. Jewish leaders: Obama wants Israel to create context for peace
By Natasha Mozgovaya
March 3, 2011
http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/u-s-jewish-leaders-obama-wants-israel-to-create-context-for-peace-1.346780

Participants of 50-member delegation that met with president says he also relayed that Palestinians 'don't feel confident' about Netanyahu's commitment to territorial concessions and urged Israel 'search your souls' about seriousness on peace.

U.S. President Barack Obama told Jewish leaders this week that Israel must use its military, political and cultural strength to create a context for peace with the Palestinians, according to participants of a 50-member delegation that met the president at the White House on Tuesday.

Obama stressed to the delegates of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations that Washington was committed in its support for Israel and its security.

But some of the delegates, who asked not to be named, also said that the president hinted that Israel must do some soul-searching regarding its commitment to peace.

Obama relayed that the Palestinians "don't feel confident that the Netanyahu government is serious about territorial concessions," said participants. Obama also indicated that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was set on establishing a state during his tenure and be amenable to an acceptable deal if offered, said the delegates.

Rabbi Steven Wernick, CEO and Executive Vice President of the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism, lauded Obama for what he called a "balanced and fair" approach to the stalled peace process.

"I think the president was consistent in hinting that both sides have to demonstrate greater seriousness for it to occur. I asked the president specifically about the Palestinians creating a context of peace in their culture, especially after the Palestinian leaks showed there is a big difference between their public and private statements," said Wernick.

"He said there is an opportunity in the region for a rigorous debate. He asked for soul-search for everyone. I think he was talking about the objective reality that both sides need to think if they indeed want peace – he spoke specifically about Netanyahu and Israeli leadership, but he spoke also about Palestinians," added Wernick.

"He spoke about Iran and Syria, and expressed optimism regarding the revolution in the Arab world – but cautious one. That we have incredible opportunity to create context for that to happen. What most impressed me was his command of the issues and the ability to try to craft a reasonable strategy considering the reality of circumstances. I thought he was extremely balanced and fair."

“People who have negative views about this administration will have them reinforced. I am convinced that the President is 100% supportive of Israel and has a desire to reach peace between Israel and the Palestinians," said Wernick. "He and his advisers stated explicitly and repeatedly that the U.S. remains committed to Israel's security.

"I didn’t get a sense they are tired of the process. They are looking for ways to promote it – the problems that he raised are that Palestinians are concerned about territory and national determination and Israelis are concerned about their security," added Wernick.

"We thanked the President for making the veto at the Security Council and the President reassured us about the U.S. commitment to Israel’s sovereignty and security. But he did talk about the fact that Israel is the stronger party here, militarily, culturally and politically. And Israel needs to create context for it to happen."

A White House statement defined the meeting as "productive," citing the President, and emphasized "America's unshakable support for Israel’s security, opposition to any effort to delegitimize it or single it out for criticism, and commitment to achieve a peace that will secure the future for Arabs and Israelis alike."

The delegation was led by Conference of Presidents Chairman Alan Solow and Executive Vice Chairman Malcolm Hoenlein, who thanked the President for "the extraordinary session."

"The open lines of communication with President Obama and his Administration are highly valued and provide us with the opportunity to articulate the views of American Jewry on issues that face our country," they said.

During the meeting that lasted about one hour, Obama shared with his guests his view on the turbulence in the Middle East, the recent veto of the resolution at the United Nations Security Council that condemned settlement construction, and prospects of peace between Israel and its neighbors.

Following the different emerging reports regarding the meeting, the Conference of Presidents issued a second statement on Thursday, in which it stressed that the meeting with Obama was a positive one.

"Contrary to certain public reports, the meeting was conducted in an atmosphere of warmth, friendship and openness and there was no expression of hostility toward Israel or its government," the statement read.

"In fact, the President stated his unequivocal support for the strong relationship and the unbreakable bonds between the United States and Israel and his personal commitment to working with Israel in these challenging times."

The delegation also met with Dan Shapiro, Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa at the National Security Council, who usually briefs the Jewish leaders on the current

administration's positions vis-à-vis Middle Eastern issues, Dennis Ross, Special Assistant to the President, who addressed J Street's annual conference as the administration's representative; and David S. Cohen, the Department of Treasury's Acting Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, who spoke about sanctions against Iran.

Wires

Dennis Ross to address J Street confab
February 14, 2011
http://www.jta.org/news/article/2011/02/14/2742970/dennis-ross-to-address-j-street

WASHINGTON (JTA) -- Dennis Ross, the senior adviser to President Obama on Middle East issues, will address this year's J Street conference.

Ross, seen as an administration hard-liner on Iran and as arguing for greater consideration of Israel's needs in peace negotiations, would be a coup for the group, which consistently has come under fire from the right and from some Democrats for not being sufficiently pro-Israel. White House officials confirmed J Street's announcement.

The group, which describes itself as "pro-Israel and pro-peace," also said that Michael Oren, the Israeli ambassador to Washington, would not participate or allow embassy staff to participate in the Feb. 26-March 1 confab in Washington.

Oren's spokesman, Jonathan Peled, told JTA that the decision stemmed from J Street's urging the United States not to exercise its veto if and when the U.N. Security Council considers a resolution condemning Israel's settlement policy. A number of other groups and a range of Congress members of both parties have urged a veto.

J Street opposes bringing the settlement issue to the United Nations in part because of the body's anti-Israel bias, but also says a veto would damage U.S. credibility because the resolution is written to hew closely to U.S. policy, which also opposes settlements.

Oren called J Street director Jeremy Ben Ami last week to give him his decision, Peled said. "The ambassador said he is open to continued conversation with J Street on ways it might support Israel," he said.

J Street has suffered a number of reversals in recent months.

Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.), one of the highest-profile Jewish lawmakers taking J Street donations, cut off the group over the issue of the U.N. veto, and last year The Washington Times revealed that Ben Ami had misled reporters in denying that liberal financier George Soros had donated money to the group.

J Street faced similar controversies before its first conference in 2009, when a coordinated campaign by neoconservatives pressured Republican and conservative Democratic Congress members into withdrawing sponsorship of the conference.

Notably, J Street this year has dropped any attempt to garner such sponsorships.

For J Streeters, pro-Palestinian is pro-Israel
By Uriel Heilman
March 1, 2011
http://www.jta.org/news/article/2011/03/01/2743137/for-j-streeters-pro-palestinian-is-pro-israel

WASHINGTON (JTA) -- The detractors of J Street, the "pro-Israel, pro-peace" lobbying organization, like to portray the organization's leader, Jeremy Ben-Ami, as so far to the left of mainstream American Jewish opinion as to be out of bounds.

If they think Ben-Ami is too much of a lefty on Israel, just wait till they meet J Street's rank and file.

At the organization's conference in Washington this week, which organizers say drew 2,400 people, the crowd was emphatic in its insistence on Palestinian rights, offered only weak, scattered applause for an Obama administration official's line about America's strong support for Israeli security, and complained that more Palestinians should have been featured on conference panels.

For Arnold Moses, an activist in his 70s who came to the conference from Reston, Va., J Street just wasn't reflective of his politics. "They're too kind to the Israelis," he said of J Street. "Obama's too soft on Israel. The Palestinians need to get out of the jail they're in."

Activists from the traditional pro-Israel camp have seized upon such sentiment as evidence that J Street is not pro-Israel but pro-Palestinian. They question the organization's funding sources, its association with certain Arab and far-left organizations, and its advocacy of U.S. pressure on Israel.

But in J Street's view, this misses the point. For Ben-Ami and J Street supporters, being pro-Palestinian is not incompatible with being pro-Israel. In their mind, standing up for Palestinian rights, criticizing Israel's policies in the West Bank and advocating for more pressure on the Israeli government is a way of supporting Israel by helping, or forcing, Israel to become the kind of place they believe it ought to be.

"We don't view this as a zero-sum conflict," Ben-Ami said Monday in a question-and-answer session with reporters. "You can be pro-Israel and be an advocate for the rights of the Palestinian people."

This approach explains why many audience members applauded when a questioner on one panel asked why the United States doesn't impose economic sanctions on Israel if Israeli settlements in the West Bank are a violation of the Geneva Convention. It's why they clapped when panelist Marwan Bishara, an Al Jazeera political analyst, wondered aloud why Dennis Ross, the Obama administration's senior envoy on Middle East issues, was invited to the conference at all. It's why

the introduction of New York Times columnist Roger Cohen, a fierce critic of U.S. aid to Israel, drew enthusiastic whooping before he had even uttered a word.

For this crowd, the Israeli government is to blame for the lack of peace in the Middle East. Their main beef is with the traditional pro-Israel camp, not with the Palestinians.

“I would have liked to see an Israeli uprising of the people against our government,” Ron Pundak, director general of the Peres Center for Peace, said in a panel discussion Sunday about the implications of the uprisings in the Arab world.

“We don't have today an Israeli partner or leadership,” Pundak said to applause. The Israeli people should “get rid of this terrible government which today is governing Israel.”

Ben-Ami wasn’t entirely comfortable with every speaker at the conference. But borrowing a line long recited by the New Israel Fund -- another Jewish organization that has come under heavy criticism for its support of Palestinian groups and the Israeli organizations that help them -- Ben-Ami said J Street is committed to having an open conversation, including with parties with which it disagrees.

That's why, he said, he invited Jewish Voice for Peace, an organization classified by the Anti-Defamation League as one of the top 10 anti-Israel groups in the United States and which promotes the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement targeting Israel, even though, Ben-Ami says, he and J Street are against the BDS campaign.

“The conversation within the Jewish community will be best served if you have different points of view,” he said.

If any Jewish voices were absent from the conference, it was those on the right side of the political spectrum. Even centrist voices were few and far between. Their absence became glaring as panelists at session after session agreed with and applauded one another.

The lack of diversity did not go unnoticed by some of the younger people at the conference.

“They could have used some more right-leaning speakers to balance their perspective,” said Avi Fine, a student at Carleton College.

“There wasn't enough disagreeing,” said another student, Mika Gang of Toronto’s Ryerson University. “It would be cool to have more right-wing, more dissenting viewpoints.”

In the lineup at J Street, the most right-wing speakers seemed to be Ross, who represents a White House criticized by many American Jews as too left-wing on Israel, and Nachman Shai, an Israeli Knesset member from Kadima, whose centrist party leads the opposition to the right-wing coalition of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Judging from the panelists and the crowd’s reaction to their remarks, even Ben-Ami would find himself on the right end of the J Street spectrum, with his positions supporting sanctions against

Iran and opposing the BDS movement, and his red line against J Street associating with those who deny Israel's right to exist.

When Ben-Ami told reporters, “This is unapologetically and unabashedly a pro-Israel organization that believes in the state for the Jewish people,” he spoke while sitting in the same chair where an hour earlier a young Jewish J Street attendee was casually chatting with a friend about how he considers himself an anti-Zionist. For his part, Ben-Ami claims to be the pole at the center of J Street's “big tent.”

One of the few conference sessions featuring sharp disagreement was about the BDS movement. Rebecca Vilkomerson, the executive director of Jewish Voice for Peace, compared the campaign's tactics to those of Gandhi, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Cesar Chavez, saying it’s “the most hopeful strategy we can engage in.” Kenneth Bob, the president of Ameinu, a labor Zionist group whose motto is “Liberal values, progressive Israel,” argued that BDS seeks to displace Israel, not simply end the occupation of the West Bank. He said he sees “no common cause” with BDS leaders.

The crowd at the conference, the organization's second since its inception about three years ago, was hardly monolithic. It included men and women in kipot and the odd woman in a hijab; Israeli politicians and Palestinian journalists; gray-haired rabbis from California and college students from Vermont, including non-Jewish ones.

The conference's location at the same site as the annual spring policy conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee -- the Washington Convention Center -- begged comparisons between the two. J Street sees itself as the left-wing alternative to AIPAC, while AIPAC insists it is centrist, not right wing, and has been waging a behind-the-scenes battle to malign and sideline J Street ever since its creation.

The battle in the Jewish community over whether or not J Street is kosher extends to the halls of Congress and the Knesset. The Israeli Knesset members who came to the conference were slammed in the Israeli media for their decision to participate, and Michael Oren, the Israeli ambassador to the United States, declined to attend.

Though some 60 Congress members came to the organization's gala dinner Monday night, it was a fraction of the number that regularly show up for AIPAC's gala dinner.

One former J Street ally in Congress, Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.), publicly severed ties with the organization in January when J Street petitioned the Obama administration not to veto a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlements. He called J Street “so open-minded about what constitutes support for Israel that its brains have fallen out,” saying in a statement, “America really does need a smart, credible, politically active organization that is as aggressively pro-peace as it is pro-Israel. Unfortunately, J Street ain’t it."

Nevertheless, by any measure, the massing of 2,400 people for a conference by a 3-year-old Jewish organization is a sign of notable success and an indication that in the future this “pro-

Israel, pro-peace" lobby may have greater influence over U.S.-Israeli issues -- or, at least, the discourse within the Jewish community.

Ben Ami says AIPAC should recognize that.

"I think the time has come for them to agree to take the stage with us and with these issues," Ben-Ami said of AIPAC. "We are a legitimate, established part of the communal conversation."

Ross: More Time Needed for Bridging Peace Proposals
March 3, 2011
http://www.jewishexponent.com/article/22998/

Washington (JTA) -- More time is needed to bridge gaps between Israelis and Palestinians before direct peace talks can resume, Dennis Ross said.

In a speech Monday to the J Street conference in Washington, the senior White House adviser on Middle East peace issues said the current process of the United States working with both sides on bridging proposals needs more time.

"That process hasn't played out yet," Ross said. "We'll make a judgment on where the process is, where the two sides are and what we think the most appropriate steps are on where we'll have the most impact.

Though he called the status quo "unsustainable," Ross also rejected unilateral moves, including the current Palestinian effort to gain international recognition for statehood.

"Unilateral moves aren't going to produce agreements unless unilateral moves are basically negotiated behind the scenes," he said. "For peace to succeed, the parties have to own it and defend it. They're not going to defend it unless they own it."

Referring to the unrest in the Arab world, Ross said the Obama administration had been talking to Arab leaders about the need for reform from its earliest days in office.

"That is not a conversation that began on Jan. 25," he said, referring to the date of the first major demonstration in Egypt. "We stressed repeatedly that Egyptians needed to open their political system.

"We support principles, processes and institution building, and not personalities. We have been looking at these issues of reform and how to carry them out in the region for some period of time."

Ross praised the Egyptian military for its handling of the protests that toppled President Hosni Mubarak and said now is not the time to cut aid to Egypt, but to use aid to help Egypt in its time of political transition.

Arab unrest alters power balance in as yet unseen ways
By Uriel Heilman
March 3, 2011
http://www.jta.org/news/article/2011/03/01/2743140/arab-unrest-alters-power-balance-in-as-yet-unseen-ways

WASHINGTON (JTA) -- They were the devils they knew.

Though Israel lives in a dangerous neighborhood, surrounded by countries whose leaders or people wish its destruction, over the years it had adjusted to the status quo, more or less figuring out how to get by while keeping an eye on gradual change.

But the sudden upheaval in the region that in a matter of weeks has toppled regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, and threatens autocrats in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and elsewhere, is forcing Israel to grapple with how to recalibrate for dramatic change.

For the time being, as Israel sits and watches how things play out from Tripoli to Manama, Bahrain, it's not clear exactly how the game will change.

"The best answer is we don't know," Ron Pundak, the director of the Peres Center for Peace in Herzliya said this week at the J Street conference in Washington.

"The biggest change since 1967 is this tsunami rolling across the region whose end results no one really can foresee," said Samuel Lewis, a former U.S. ambassador to Israel who attended the conference. "Something new is happening in the Arab world."

In some places, like Libya, the immediate effects on Israel are minimal. Libyan strongman Muammar Gadhafi's state has had no ties to Israel, so the dictator's demise -- if it comes -- wouldn't change much for Israelis.

"The civil war raging in Libya poses no immediate cause for concern in Israel," Israeli journalist Avi Issacharoff wrote in Haaretz.

However, the cumulative effects of the Middle East unrest are prompting shifts throughout the region that may require dramatic strategic rethinking in the Jewish state.

Every time a protest movement in the Middle East succeeds, protest movements elsewhere are emboldened, and that has put many regimes that for decades have not been hostile to Israel -- including those of the Persian Gulf, Jordan and North Africa -- on alert and at risk.

With Israel and the West engaged in a proxy war with Iran for regional hegemony, the fall of autocratic regimes allied with the West provides an opening for Iran to expand its power and sphere of influence.

And Iran is intent on doing so. It was no accident that just days after the fall of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Tehran dispatched two warships to sail through the Suez Canal -- something Iran had not dared to do since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The ships docked in Syria in what Iran's Navy chief, Rear Adm. Habibollah Sayyari, described as "a routine and friendly visit" to "carry the message of peace and friendship to world countries."

In truth, it was an exercise in saber rattling.

Iran is projecting "self-confidence and certain assertiveness in the region," Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak told CNN. Nevertheless, he said, "I don't like it, but I don't think that any one of us should be worried by it."

When a pair of rockets fired from Gaza hit the Israeli city of Beersheba last week, some Israeli analysts saw it as another example of Iran's saber rattling. Iran has sent weapons to Gaza and seeks more influence there, even though the strip's Hamas rulers are Sunni Muslims, and Iran is a Shiite power.

"I do not recommend that anyone test Israel's determination," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said after the rocket attack.

The great fear is that regimes friendly toward Israel (Egypt, Jordan), or friendly with Israel by proxy via the United States (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain), or not actively hostile (Libya, among others), will be co-opted by elements with greater animus toward the Jewish state.

That hostility could come from any one of a number of places. On the Egyptian front, the long-outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, an ally of Hamas, stands to gain greater power. In the cases of Tunisa and Libya, there is fear that al-Qaeda could capitalize on a power vacuum and take root. In Bahrain, which is overwhelmingly Shiite but ruled by a Sunni king, the concern is that genuine democracy could throw the country the way of Iran.

"The regional balance of power is changing, and not necessarily in Israel's favor," Robert Serry, the U.N. secretary-general's special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, said at the J Street conference.

But there could be some good news, too. The uprisings that have spread from North Africa to the Persian Gulf have been broad-based, loosely organized protest movements led by young people networking through the Internet and social media like Facebook. They have not been dominated by Islamists, and the protesters have not made Israel a focal point.

Whether these young people really will take hold of the levers of power, and how they will relate to Israel in the future, are open questions.

For those concerned with Israel, the unrest is being interpreted one of two ways, depending largely on political leanings. Those on the right point to the instability as a reason for Israel to be more wary of concessions in any peace agreements, since their peace partner could disappear at any time.

“Why should Israel expect that another agreement would not be overturned by some new revolution, change of mind or cynical long-term plan?” columnist Barry Rubin wrote in The Jerusalem Post.

Those on the left say that if Israel does not resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict quickly with a peace deal, the new generation of leaders emerging in the Arab world won’t be able to see Israel as anything other than an occupier and repressor of Palestinian rights. Arab commentators echo that thinking.

“The hatred of Israel will not end until you start treating Palestinians with freedom and dignity,” Egyptian journalist Mona Eltahawy said at the J Street conference. “This is the time for Israel to sit down and make concrete concessions.”

In Jerusalem, the government is still in the wait-and-see mode, albeit with as much handwringing as possible.

Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon, speaking Tuesday in Brussels, warned that the danger is that democracy movements in the Arab world will be “hijacked,” emulating the “model of Iran, the model of Hamas in Gaza, the model of Hezbollah in Lebanon,” according to the German news agency DPA.

Ayalon also said the unrest in the Arab world demonstrates that the notion of the Arab-Israel conflict being the region’s most serious issue is just not true.

“The real major problem of the Middle East, which is now so glaringly evident, is the dysfunctionality of the Arab societies," Ayalon reportedly said, noting the absence of “rights of any kind.”

At Berkeley campus, Jewish students on far left and far right on Israel talk about their motivations

By Sue Fishkoff
March 7, 2011
http://www.jta.org/news/article/2011/03/07/2743176/focus-on-uc-berkeley-four-jewish-students-speak-out-on-israel

BERKELEY, Calif. (JTA) -- It's March, which means the days get longer and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict heats up on campuses across North America with the annual staging of Israel Apartheid Week.

Last year, pro-Israel activists countered Apartheid Week events ranging from anti-Israel speeches to the staging of mock Israeli army checkpoints with pro-Israel events on 28 campuses highlighting Israel's diversity and progressive character. This year, more campuses are expected to join in.

One of the most politically active campuses in the nation has been the University of California, Berkeley. Last year it was the scene of a protracted debate over an anti-Israeli divestment bill that tore apart an already fractured campus community and left many students shaken, others angry and still others too exhausted to care anymore.

In recent days, JTA spoke to four Jewish student activists at Berkeley about what motivates them on Israel-related issues. The students span the political and religious spectrum, from an ardent Zionist to a supporter of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, from Orthodox to secular. They all have strong Jewish backgrounds -- three are day school graduates, and the fourth is an Israeli army veteran.

Here are their stories:

Jacob Lewis, leader of Zionist student group

While 100 people chatted noisily in the crowded room at Berkeley where Arab affairs expert Mordechai Kedar of Bar-Ilan University was about to start his lecture, Jacob Lewis was off in the hallway quietly unfolding more chairs for latecomers.

That's his style. The 20-year-old sophomore isn't the firebrand one might expect of the president of Tikvah, an avowedly Zionist student group that broke away from Hillel three years ago because its founders thought the established Jewish student organization on campus wasn't pro-Israel enough.

"We're the Zionist voice at UC Berkeley," Lewis says firmly. "We advocate for Zionism as the national movement for self-determination of the Jewish people in their homeland, Israel. We

were founded because no one else on campus was making that argument. No one was standing up to the rhetoric."

Tikvah brings pro-Israel speakers to campus. Its activists distribute leaflets next to Israel Apartheid Week events and spearhead letter-writing campaigns to protest anti-Semitism. But they also present the diversity of Israeli culture and society by hosting events like a recent demonstration of Krav Maga, a form of self-defense developed in Israel.

The point, Lewis explains, isn't that Israel is all good, but that it's not all bad either.

That's his main beef not only with Israel's detractors on campus, like the Apartheid Week activists, but also with Hillel-affiliated groups, like the one that brought to campus speakers from Breaking the Silence, a group of Israeli army veterans who oppose Israel's occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. Lewis said they "nitpicked details" of a very complex situation, and thereby generated anti-Israel and anti-Jewish hostility instead of thoughtful conversation.

"They make the delegitimization of Israel on campus much more legitimate because they're seen as a mainstream group, part of Hillel," Lewis charges of the group that brought Breaking the Silence to campus.

On the other hand, Lewis is wary of right-wing Jewish community members who spew anti-Islamic hatred at meetings attended by Tikvah students. He doesn't want them controlling the Israel dialogue on campus either.

"We don't believe Islam is the cause of our problems," he says.

Referring to the adults from the larger community, Lewis adds, "When people come and talk about 'what all the Arabs want' or 'this is what Islam says,' that's difficult for us to deal with.

"We walk a very fine line," he acknowledges. "Different elements from the community want us to do different things. But we're 100 percent a student organization. We don't really care what other people think we should do. We know what we need to do."

Tikvah exists only at Berkeley, Lewis notes.

"Berkeley is an absolutely crazy place," he says. "The rhetoric is much more venomous. The campus is much more sympathetic to a leftist worldview. And we don't get the same support from the Jewish community that you might get on other campuses."

Yet Lewis chose to attend Berkeley after 12 years of Modern Orthodox day school in Chicago precisely because of the Bay Area's diversity.

"In high school I was surrounded by people who believed like I did, but I was usually to the left of my friends," he says. "Then I got to Berkeley and I got involved with Tikvah right away. I feel like I'm wrong no matter where I am."

Noah Stern, student body president active in Hillel

Noah Stern has many demands on his time. The 21-year-old senior is an active member of Hillel, a fraternity brother at Delta Chi -- and president of the student body. Plus he tries to squeeze in a little skiing.

Stern is the third Hillel activist in 10 years to be elected student president.

“We’re all Jewish guys from Los Angeles, and all in the same frat,” he says.

As president, Stern must navigate between his responsibilities to the entire student body and his personal Jewish convictions. It was easier last year, he says, when as a student senator he could represent his own constituents during the acrimonious debate over an Israel divestment bill.

Stern voted against the bill and went on to co-author a substitute resolution that did not single out Israel. The first bill passed but was vetoed by his predecessor; the second was voted down.

Now as president, Stern is happy the issue hasn’t resurfaced this year.

“My feeling is there’s acknowledgment that perhaps the [student assembly] is not the most appropriate venue for international politics,” he says.

Stern has a fine pedigree for a student activist: His father is a Reform rabbi, his mother works for the Jewish Federations of North America, and he attended Jewish day schools and Jewish summer camp throughout his childhood. He spent a year after high school in Israel with Kivunim, a Jewish program that encourages multicultural literacy and understanding.

In the same vein, last year he and a Muslim student co-founded Breaking Bread, an organization that sponsors coexistence dinner discussions on campus. The Jewish-Muslim dinner last December focused on cultural and religious similarities rather than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“I won’t pretend it solved the conflict, but this is how I prefer to engage with the issue,” Stern says. “In general I’m not a protester. It presents a black-and-white position on issues that are very gray.”

As student president, even if he liked holding signs on Sproul Plaza, the arena of choice for Berkeley protesters since the early 1960s, he would be enjoined from lending his voice to a particular cause.

Israel Apartheid Week doesn’t stress him out, and he’s equally sanguine about Jewish students who protest Apartheid Week events.

“These are students that believe adamantly in their causes and are visible about it," Stern says. "That’s how we do it here. Israel Apartheid Week, Israeli Peace and Diversity Week -- it’s the Berkeley way.”

For his own part, he is way too savvy to speak, or act, off the cuff.

Asked about Peter Beinart's New York Review of Books essay, which raised establishment hackles by suggesting that young Jews don't have the same attachment to Israel and the Jewish community as their elders, Stern says Beinart was right on.

"I don't think the adult Jewish community is as in tune with Jewish college students as they sometimes think," he says, measuring his words carefully. "Strategies that might have worked in the past don't necessarily meet the needs of today's students."

Not all Jewish students care about Israel, Stern says, nor should they be forced to. Those who do care don't always agree, and that's fine, too.

"The fact that different Jewish groups with difference stances on Israel exist on campus shows there's a need," he says.

Simone Zimmerman, J Street U member

Simone Zimmerman, a sophomore, spoke Feb. 28 at the J Street conference in Washington about the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement on her campus.

"I recognize that BDS seeks to address serious human rights issues in Israel and the territories," said Zimmerman, 20, a Middle East Studies major. But at Berkeley, she said, rather than creating discussion, "it created a polarizing atmosphere where both sides sank further into the extremes of their positions."

She also said "It fostered animosity, squashed nuance and alienated the rational voices most essential to addressing these complex issues."

Zimmerman was "really nervous" about giving her speech, she told JTA two days later. It didn't help that minutes before her session, BDS supporters began tweeting each other to flood the room.

"My session was the only one with security outside," she noted.

It was frustration with both pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian groups at Berkeley that led Zimmerman to join forces with J Street U, the organization's campus arm. She said it was there that she found the "rational voices" she sought.

Zimmerman grew up in a Conservative home in Los Angeles and is an alumna of Jewish day school, Camp Ramah and United Synagogue Youth, the Conservative youth movement. She's spent a lot of time in Israel, including a three-month exchange program in the 10th grade.

When she arrived at Berkeley, Zimmerman said she "fell in love with the atmosphere, the excitement I felt on campus." She chose the school for that diversity and energy, but also

because it was one of the only campuses where students told her they loved coming to Hillel. That was important to her.

But last year, her first on campus, ended with a vitriolic battle over the student government's divestment bill. The hostility and intolerance she witnessed on both sides of the debate scared and saddened her.

“I saw a big hole in the conversation the community was having on Israel,” she says. “There’s a really divided scene here, very polarized. Students in the middle are exhausted, and the extremes get more extreme.”

Ironically, she learned about J Street through criticism of the group by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which portrayed it as anti-Israel.

“Then, when J Street opposed the divestment bill, I thought, that’s interesting -- that’s not what I’d heard about them,” Zimmerman recalls.

Zimmerman is a consensus builder, not a placard waver. In addition to J Street U, she is chair of her Hillel’s Israel Action Committee, which she says was drained of its most active members when Tikvah siphoned off the most ardent Zionists and Kesher Enoshi: Progressives for Activism in Israel grabbed from the left.

“Our main goal is to educate, not advocate,” she says. “We’re not giving people fact sheets or telling them how to respond in 10 steps. We’re trying to teach people about a more nuanced, complex Israel.”

Zimmerman sees J Street as providing a middle ground in that conversation, although some of her closest friends don’t get it. When she called a friend in Washington to say she was speaking at J Street’s conference, the friend said, “Why would you be there?”

“People who are in the middle and who would appreciate what J Street is trying to do have been scared away by the establishment,” she says. “It’s been demonized.”

As for Israel Apartheid Week and its counterpart, Israeli Peace and Diversity Week, Zimmerman says, “I hate this week.”

Tom Pessah, Israeli active in Students for Justice in Palestine

Tom Pessah bristles when he hears people refer to “the Israelis” or “the Jewish community.”

“There’s no such thing,” he asserts. “I don’t feel I represent all Israelis or all Jewish students.”

Many Israelis and many Jews would agree.

Pessah, a Tel Aviv native, Israeli army veteran and 37-year-old doctoral student in sociology, is active in Students for Justice in Palestine, which advocates for Palestinian independence and

supports the BDS movement. Students for Justice in Palestine was founded in 2001 at Berkeley, where it is a main organizer of Israel Apartheid Week, and the organization has since spread to other schools.

Like other Jewish students interviewed by JTA, Pessah says his main interest is opening the conversation about Israel and allowing all sides to be heard. Also like others, he sees his own organization as the champion of dialogue and other groups out to obstruct it.

Last year he went to his first Shabbat dinner at the Berkeley Hillel. The following week, he says, a pro-Israel student asked him not to show up anymore and to pass on the request to his fellow activists from Students for Justice in Palestine.

"He said, 'It makes me uncomfortable because the Jewish community perceives you as anti-Semitic.' He was smiling, as if I have to accommodate his feelings," Pessah says, with some astonishment.

He hasn't been back to Hillel since, and neither have his friends from Students for Justice in Palestine.

"A lot of us feel unwelcome," Pessah says.

That said, he acknowledges that relations with Hillel, and even with the Zionist student group Tikvah, are better than they were two years ago. Tikvah's founders, whom he describes as "very aggressive," have graduated, and the directorship of Hillel has changed.

Pessah says he's proud to be Jewish. Although he feels many Jews exaggerate the extent of anti-Semitism, he says it's important to speak out when it surfaces.

Three years ago, Students for Justice in Palestine was blamed when a Star of David on campus was defaced with a swastika.

"We did not do that," he insists. "We would never do such a thing."

In fact, Pessah is able to use his leftist credentials to prevent anti-Semitic speakers from coming to campus. On two occasions, he says, the Muslim Student Association asked his group to co-sponsor speakers whom Pessah discovered had made anti-Jewish statements in the past. When his organization communicated that to the Muslim students, they canceled the speakers.

"They take us seriously because they know we wouldn't use the term 'anti-Semitic' " lightly, he says.

Pessah says he has not turned his back on Israel; quite the contrary: He plans on going back after receiving his doctorate. That's why he's active politically.

"I do this to make it a better country," he says. "A comfortable life for Jews in Israel is dependent on a comfortable life for Palestinians."

Once, while he was demonstrating for Palestinian rights, an Arab student approached him and said that seeing Pessah standing there made him realize his parents were wrong, that not all Jews were alike.

“That’s so important,” Pessah says. “It encouraged me to go to more protests. By building up this solidarity, we stop seeing each other in stereotypical terms. That’s my niche. That’s what I’m about.”

Dennis Ross: Time running out for peace; status quo unsustainable
By Yitzhak Benhorin
February 28, 2011
http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4035767,00.html

During J Street conference, Obama aide rejects Palestinian effort to gain international recognition for statehood, but says 'demographic clock ticking'

WASHINGTON – The Obama Administration's "ongoing strategic discussions with the Israelis have taken on a character, a range of issues, intensity, and a frequency that is simply unprecedented," Dennis Ross told J Street's annual conference on Monday.

The White House adviser on Middle East peace issues said that one of the Obama Administration's principles was "an unshakeable commitment to Israel's security."

Ross, a former US special envoy to the Middle East during the Clinton Administration, said that despite the US' financial woes it is continuing to support Israel's security needs, including the funding of the "Iron Dome" missile defense system.

Addressing the stalled peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, Ross said more time is needed to bridge gaps before direct talks can resume, adding that in the coming months the Americans will simultaneously discuss the core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with both sides.

The senior American official said the status quo was "unsustainable," but also rejected unilateral moves, including the current Palestinian effort to gain international recognition for statehood.

"Unilateral moves aren't going to produce agreements unless unilateral moves are basically negotiated behind the scenes," he said. "For peace to succeed, the parties have to own it and defend it. They're not going to defend it unless they own it.

"There are a number of clocks ticking. There is a demographic clock that all of you are aware of; there are also biological clocks of young leaders emerging – you want them to believe a solution is a possibility, not an impossibility," Ross said.

The US official continued to say that the revolution in Egypt "has created concern for many in the region; Egypt has been a pillar for Israel's pursuit of peace. The last thing we want to see is extremists benefit from the situation.

"It's the interest of Egypt that the peace (with Israel) becomes warmer, not colder," he said,

Obama's aide also said the US "we will keep an eye on Iran and the pressure on. While the door will always remain open for diplomacy, but we remain determined to prevent Iran from acquiring the nuclear weapons and we won’t be deflected from this goal."

Pro-Peace Jewish Lobby Group Urges Obama to Seize Moment
By Eli Clifton
March 1, 2011
http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=54677

WASHINGTON, Mar1 (IPS) - J Street, the Washington-based "Pro-Israel, Pro-Peace" advocacy group, drew a large crowd to its annual conference this year despite criticism over its controversial calls for the Barack Obama administration not to veto a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank.

In the end, the administration vetoed the resolution, but the controversy appeared to have had no negative effect on the organisation's turnout for the just-ended conference, which had 2,400 participants - 900 more than last year - and over 500 students participating.

Over 50 members of Congress were in attendance and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg made a surprise appearance to honour Kathleen Peratis, vice chair of the J Street Education Fund and the recipient of the group's Tzedek V'Shalom award.

With pro-democracy revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya dominating the headlines over the past week, uncertainty about the shifting geopolitics in the region was a recurring theme in the remarks delivered by J Street leadership, panelists and an Obama administration senior Middle East adviser.

Jeremy Ben-Ami, J Street's president, told attendees, "We know in our hearts that it's not just the status quo in the Arab world that is bound to change, it is the status quo between Israel and the Palestinian people that has to change as well," at the conference's kickoff on Saturday night.

"And the events of recent weeks only convince us more deeply that the time is now for a serious and sustained effort to secure an agreement that provides for a democratic homeland for the Jewish people living side by side in peace and security with a democratic homeland for the Palestinian people," he continued.

Indeed the emphasis on taking immediate steps, with the leadership of the United States, to bring about a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian is central to J Street's mission as Washington's "political home for pro-Israel, pro- peace Americans".

J Street has gained attention for its willingness to press harder than other pro-Israel organisations in Washington - particularly the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) - to pressure Israel to halt settlement construction and for its efforts to create a political space for American Jews who are increasingly critical of the Israeli government's occupation of the West Bank and its siege on Gaza.

The organisation's founding and the appearance, for the second year in a row, of a senior Obama administration official at the conference has found a mixed reception from other "pro-Israel" groups in Washington.

This year, senior White House Middle East adviser Dennis Ross was dispatched to address the conference, leading the right-wing Emergency Committee for Israel to call on Ross to take a critical tone in his remarks to the J Street audience.

"There are few moments when someone with your experience and credibility is invited into the anti-Israel echo chamber and provided an opportunity to dispel myths, combat falsehoods, deliver much-needed moral clarity – and state clearly that the United States stands with Israel," said a Feb. 24 letter from the ECI's Executive Director Noah Pollak.

"I trust that you will seize this moment to explain why the Jewish State is not just one of our closest allies, but a country that fully deserves the admiration and moral support of all Americans," Pollak wrote.

Ross spoke on Sunday and delivered remarks which, while avoiding the harsh criticisms which Pollak called on him to make, fell short of the recurring call from J Street panelists for the Obama administration to take a more aggressive approach to bridging issues on which both the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government have been unable to find common ground.

"We will continue to press both sides to engage seriously in negotiations – the only forum and the only mechanism that can resolve this historic conflict," said Ross.

Ross deflected a question about the possibility for a new U.S. initiative to kickstart the peace process and repeated the administration's position on Iran, stating, "While the door will always remain open for diplomacy, we remain determined to prevent Iran from acquiring the nuclear weapons and we won't be deflected from this goal."

The panel following Ross's address was critical of the White House official's position, leading New York Times columnist Roger Cohen to quip after Ross had left the room, "[Ross] sat in five administrations but couldn't sit after the speech for the debate," and, "When I hear the word process, I am dying inside, there is no process and there is no peace."

The conference concluded with a keynote address from Naomi Chazan, president of the New Israel Fund and former deputy speaker of the Knesset, who told the audience, "The democratic wave spreading through the Middle East includes a free Palestine as an integral part of what is going on. And therefore, Israel as an occupying state cannot remain democratic while it rules over another people. It is antithetical to the winds of the time."

Her speech repeated the calls heard throughout the three days of panels and discussions for the Obama administration to urgently assume greater leadership in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"Neither Israel nor Palestine can [make peace] alone. Therefore, action requires that the U.S. and Europe and the international community take steps as well. The present administration in Washington must step forward now," said Chazan.

Foreign Media (not Israel)

arab news.com
The Middle East's Leading English Language Daily

We criticize Israel's policies, but believe in its right to exist: J Street founder
By Barbara Ferguson
March 1, 2011
http://arabnews.com/world/article291409.ece

WASHINGTON: J Street held its second annual conference in Washington DC this weekend. The "pro-Israel, pro-peace" organization sparked enormous controversy and was solidly criticized by lawmakers and other pro-Israel groups when it announced its support of a proposed UN Security Council resolution condemning Israeli housing development on the West Bank.

(Under pressure from key members including Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., and Minority Whip Steny Hoyer, D-Md., the Obama administration ultimately vetoed the resolution on Feb. 18.)

J Street even lost the backing of a key politician, Rep. Gary Ackerman, the former chairman of the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, over its opposition to the US veto. Ackerman accused J Street of being "so open-minded about what constitutes support for Israel that its brains have fallen out."

Founded in 2008 as a progressive Jewish political alternative to more conservative pro-Israel organizations, such as AIPAC, J Street often takes heat over its self-definition as pro-Israel while advocating a two-state solution for Israel and the Palestinians.

"As we see it, the cause of the Palestinian people – the creation of an independent state of their own – is essential to our cause as well," Jeremy Ben Ami, President of J Street, told reporters Sunday.

"Those who seek to silence criticism of Israeli policy in the name of fighting de-legitimization of Israel are making an enormous mistake. Do not ask us to stand by quietly as the present Israeli government charts a course that erodes its Jewish character, undermines its democratic principles and leads to international isolation," said Ben Ami.

Its pro-peace principles brought in almost 3,000 attendees this weekend, but it was boycotted by the Israeli Embassy which did not send a representative. "I think Israel's ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren made an enormous mistake by not attending the conference," Ben Ami said.

But several liberal Knesset members and 50 US congressmen did show up, as well as an impressive array of respected expects from the Middle East community. Invited guest speakers included Imam Faisal Abdul Rauf, head of the Cordoba Initiative (derogatorily known as the 'Ground Zero Mosque'), and Mona Eltahawy, the outspoken international public speaker on Arab and Muslim issues.

Their presence was in line with J Street's principles of finding ways for American Muslims and Jews to work together despite often serious cultural, political and religious divides.

J Street's main lobbying focus is on promoting democracy and prosperity in the Middle East, as well as urging Congress to continue funding the Palestinian Authority. J Street appears to have become an expert on handling the often hot-button issue of Muslim-Jewish issues.

Speaking at a seminar entitled "Working Together," Imam Faisal Abdul Rauf encouraged those present to "battle to eliminate the myths that many people propagate to divide us through hostility."

"The real battlefront is not between Arabs and Jews, nor Muslims and Jews, nor Muslims and the West," he said. "The real battlefront is between peace loving people in all faith communities against the radical extremists in all faith communities."

That many of us have been taught that 'the other' is our enemy – all Jews or all Muslims — is a huge mistake, said Imam Feisel: "Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) warned against extremism in religion. Perfection lies in moderation."

Hel warned of the problems of the "politicalization of religious differences and politicalization of religion."

"This politicalization of religion is one of the most dangerous developments in the last century," he said, adding that we all have differences, and we need diversity of religion, but let's not politicize them. What we do together has a huge impact on the rest of the world."

Elissa Barrett, Executive Director of the Progressive Jewish Alliance, the West Coast's leading Jewish social justice organization said one the most effective ways of overcoming this fear of other is by working together.

"We must place curiosity about each other over or assumptions about each other."

A good way to accomplish this, she said, was working together through community organizing.

"It's so easy to speak to other people in the choir; investment in charge is speaking to those whom we do not always agree with," said Barrett.

She said her group became more active with the Muslim community "after 9/11, when we saw members of the Muslim community being rounded up for questioning, and we decided to step forward and get involved to help our Muslim neighbors. Now our group actively takes steps to speak out against Islamophobia in Los Angeles."

Edina Lekovic, Director of Policy & Programming, Muslim Public Affairs Council, agreed, saying their group had also found that establishing relationships was the best way of dealing with assumptions of each other.

"This is how authentic relations are created, we are working together to fight both anti-Semitism and Islamaphobism outside our communities."

"Our relationship must be strong enough so we can survive our differences. We have to have strong relationships so that people don't walk away from the tale when an international event (such as Israel's war on Gaza) can divide them."

Rabbi Andrea London, co-chair Jewish Council on Urban Affairs Muslim Initiative in Chicago, Illinois, concurred and focused on the "many common values between Jewish and Muslim communities" adding that "one of the most common is that of justice."

They had developed relations, she said, by sharing communal work, "including building coalitions through education, cultural events, and social justice programs to build bridges together."

J-Wire
Jewish Online News from Australia and New Zealand

Liam Getreu at the J-Street Conference
By Liam Getreu
March 4, 2011
http://www.jwire.com.au/featured-articles/liam-getreu-at-the-j-street-conference/15517

Yesterday was perhaps the most content-intense and potentially-controversial day at J Street thus far. It was also probably my most enjoyable day. (You can read my previous dispatches on my blog.) In the morning, the Obama administration, having been asked to provide someone to speak at the conference, dispatched negotiator Dennis Ross. In break-out sessions in the afternoon, issues of Palestinian statehood and the boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement were discussed, and in the evening, Naomi Chazan gave the keynote address at the conference's gala dinner.

I'm going to deal with Ross and Chazan in a separate post because I felt that an afternoon session I went to, titled "Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions in 2011: Who‚Äôs Afraid of the BDS?", deserved its own (long) post. The first thing to deal with is that, as has been made clear by many detractors, J Street's conference was very inclusive of figures it did not necessarily agree with. For example, while J Street doesn't support the BDS movement, it is open to engaging many of the people within it. The notion of an "echo chamber" kept coming up, and how President Jeremy Ben-Ami and the organisers felt it was important to avoid their conference turning into that.

I believe that the role of J Street, at its crudest, is to fill a gap between an Israel right-or-wrong group and an Israel always-wrong group. At the end of the day this will include quite a large variety of people, and quite a significant grey area; given how long the former group has dominated the Jewish community in the US (and the same can be said of Australia, I would argue), this gray area is prevalent on J Street's left flank than its right.

I think it's a positive effort on J Street's behalf to be inclusive because it doesn't discount sunstantial, and often silent segments of the Jewish community. Some would argue there are red lines that can't be crossed — the JCCV and others felt that the AJDS's selective boycotting of the West Bank settlements, for example, was a step too far — but by and large it's not a negative thing to include more Jews into the communal conversation. After all, isn't that what we're all about — trying to create the most inclusive and dynamic Diaspora communities possible? Because if it's not, then count me out straight away.

The participants in this particular session were an interesting bunch, and I went to it precisely because of that. I'm staunchly anti-BDS, which I think I've made quite clear in my previous posts on the subject. But the debate is worth having anyway; a debate is always worth having. It was in that vein that Rebecca Vilkomerson, Executive Director, Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) was included on the panel. JVP has adopted the call of the BDS movement and, according to Vilkomerson, has done so because it's a chance to try and have an impact, through direct,

personal actions, on a conflict that has so far not been resolved through more conventional means.

Similarly,¬†Simone Zimmerman, a University of California Berkeley student was on the panel. Simone, who I had the chance to speak to a number of times throughout the conference, struck me as an incredible role model for the pro-Israel, pro-peace movement. On her campus, the student senate briefly passed, then ultimate revoked, a motion that divested from companies General Electric and United Technologies. All of this despite the fact that the campus had no actual investments in either company; it was a completely shameless exercise in self-admiration. But somehow, out of all of this, Simone came out of it with a message of moderation. She was continually frustrated by the campaigns from both sides on campus sinking "further into the extremism of their positions." The "animosity," she said, "squashed nuance" and turned what should have been a debate into a yelling match, both sides divided by lines that were very "damaging [to student life], scary and sad to see."

Simone's experiences led her to decide that students in the middle — those that didn't share the rhetoric created by the "ugly binary" — needed to find a voice. "Some parts of the bill spoke to [these students'] progressive values, but their commitment to Israel made them distrustful of the bill," she concluded, and rightly so. The reality is that most students on campus were left with a "BDS hangover," unable to engage with students on either side of the debate; Simone also came up with an idea as to what the cause of the hangover might be.

The standard narrative of Jewish victimhood, which clearly no longer applies in today's Middle East, and is consistently touted in *hasbara* material from Israel advocacy and other Jewish organisations, has become an unacceptable form of pro-Israel activism on campus. It's something I tried to limit in AUJS last year because, as Simone noted, it's detrimental to the pro-Israel cause on campus. Too often, these materials seem to justify the suffering of Palestinians partly because of security concerns and partly as some kind of retribution for past mistakes in not conceding to poor Israeli peace offers ("if only they'd accepted Camp David, we wouldn't be here today"). These materials failed Simone and moderate pro-Israel students at UC Berkeley, and I'm strongly of the belief they're failing students in Australia, too. (Luckily we haven't experienced anything so bad yet, but the day we do, I'm sure we'll have exactly the same situation.)

Simone's courage to stand up at a conference of this size and speak her values, but also her acumen to recognise the precarious¬†situation¬†we're in, paints her as a future leader. For that she earned the praise of all 250 people in the room, and the biggest, longest applause of all the speakers.

Both author Bernard Avishai and Ameinu President Ken Bob spoke in that session, though neither offered particularly new insight into the situation. Ameinu is a mainstream organisation, and has been for a long time. Bob's defence of Israel and attack on the BDS movement are thoughtful and insightful and present a very mainstream view of the movement.

Avishai too attacked the BDS movement, saying that it actually works *against* the very outcome. Avishai's argument is that the companies most often targeted by a BDS campaign are large,

Western countries with significant bases in Israel: the Googles,¬†Motorolas¬†and IBMs of the world. These organisations often train Israeli workers in the West and have a Western-style work¬†environment. This, combined with the often very critical universities in Israel, creates a liberal, cosmopolitan backdrop to advance the cause of human rights within Israel.

Forcing the removal of those companies will only limit that environment and reduce the efficacy of any internal movements developing in some elements of Israeli society. Indeed, to top it off, Avishai also noted that it may be fine for UC Berkeley and others to divest and boycott GE for manufacturing the jet engines used in Israeli fighter planes, but it also has the secondary effect of limiting the air conditioners and CT scanners available to Palestinians living in Israel and the Occupied Territories. To me, this summarised two of the three main anti-BDS points: its ineffectiveness and its counter-productivity.

The third point is that while many BDS-ers may purport to remain committed to a two-state solution, in reality the opposite is most likely true. The Jewish Voice for Peace is exemplary in that regard.¬†Vilkomerson, when asked directly on the position of JVP with regard to their support of the two-state solution during the Q&A, provided what was a very clear statement, wrapped in an ambiguous one.

While she said that JVP doesn't take a stance on it, to me that can only mean one thing: they support a single state between the Jordan and the¬†Mediterranean, they're just afraid to say it. From what I could understand last night, and bits of informal research I've done, it seems that the majority of JVP members think this already, so why not come out and say it? It's as if by trying to remain neutral they're able to remain half in the tent, able to take pot shots at Israel while still appearing to support it.

If the majority of JVP members support a one-state¬†solution, fine with me, just come out and say it. Don't get me wrong, I am vehemently opposed to such a platform, but what I would like is for that organisation, which clearly has already¬†exercised¬†a degree of their own brand of moral conviction by coming out in favour of the BDS campaign, to call a spade a spade. Not doing so is dishonest and lacks courage.

I know that this type of session causes significant angst and discomfort among some people, including among those who think that J Street has some hidden pro-BDS agenda, or some deep seeded desire to unseat the Jewish state from existence. Having that session was brave, but it was also the right thing to do. Further, it paid off; the discussion was vibrant, with the majority of those at the conference understanding the BDS movement for what it is, and understanding why it doesn't have a place as part of the pro-Israel, pro-peace movement. Hopefully having more of an understanding, this dispatch can¬†allay¬†the fears of those people and help to ensure elements of the pro-Israel, pro-peace movement are seen for the mainstream voices they are.

Liam Getreu is a Melbourne student and writer, and a former chairperson of both the Australasian Union of Jewish Students and the Australian Zionist Youth Council. He attended this week's J Street Conference and blogged about it on his website at www.liamgetreu.com. The opinions expressed are his own.

Op-eds/Editorials

The Boston Globe

A changing American Jewish landscape
By Jesse Singal
March 15, 2011
http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2011/03/15/a_changing_american_jewish_landscape/

JEREMY BEN-AMI, head of the "pro-Israel, pro-peace'' group J Street, did something uncharacteristic recently: He called out powerful rival Jewish groups. "It makes no sense that for three years, the leadership of such institutions as AIPAC, the American Jewish Committee, and the Anti-Defamation League have almost uniformly refused to take the stage with me or with representatives of J Street,'' he said at J Street's annual conference.

This was a major departure from J Street's prior strategy of mostly avoiding direct criticism of these American Jewish groups. J Street still doesn't have nearly the sway of its larger rivals, but its quick growth in its first three years of existence points to the massive void left by the ADL and AIPAC. Ben-Ami's boldness shows how the American Jewish landscape is changing.
J Street's success is due in part to the failures of other big Jewish groups. A big-tent, centrist approach that staunchly defends both Israelis' and Palestinians' rights to thrive was absent from the scene before J Street arrived, and it is a natural fit for the relatively liberal American Jewish community.

There's an increasing, fundamental divide between the established Jewish groups in this country and many American Jews. The two sides simply do not occupy the same political ground, because American Jews are less and less conducive to the panicked, everything-is-about-to-turn-to-dust approach to Israel policy that has previously been so compelling (and justifiably so, until recently).

This approach may hold sway among many of the most powerful, influential pro-Israel figures in Washington, but it's a policy that in effect tells millions of Americans that because they dislike far-right Israeli politicians or believe Palestinians deserve the same rights as Jews, they are self-haters or anti-Israel. Any state of affairs in which Mike Huckabee is lauded as a pro-Israel stalwart, but the hypothetical "median American Jew'' is viewed as inexcusably wobbly on Israel, is profoundly problematic.

This is a problem for the established groups. And it will only grow, because the repellent effect of the current approach has been strongest among the younger generation. As Peter Beinart explained in a New York Review of Books article last year that is still reverberating today, when pollster Frank Luntz interviewed young American Jews to find out why they didn't feel more connected to Israel, he found that the "only kind of Zionism they found attractive was a Zionism that recognized Palestinians as deserving of dignity and capable of peace, and they were quite willing to condemn an Israeli government that did not share those beliefs.''

This, combined with an Israeli government that has taken a hard turn to the right in recent years — and distance from 9/11, whose aftershocks helped resuscitate some of the community's existential panic — has left the median American Jew with less reason than ever to feel connected to the big Jewish groups. As Beinart sharply put it, young American Jews found that the kind of modern, inclusive Zionism they might be attracted to "was the kind that the American Jewish establishment has been working against for most of their lives.''

J Street's strategy of staking out the middle of the debate over Israel has attracted attention from many Jews who had felt increasingly left out of the discussion.

AIPAC and its ilk are still in many ways the center of the American Jewish political universe, and will continue to be influential for years to come. But how many? As the "facts on the ground'' and the demographic makeup of the American Jewish community both change, these groups' stances will come to reflect the opinions of smaller and smaller percentages of that community. J Street has recognized this. What remains to be seen is whether the established organizations will.

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THE JEWISH DAILY FORWARD

Hey J Street, Is There a Realist in the House?
By J.J. Goldberg
March 2, 2011
http://forward.com/articles/135826/

Wandering the halls of J Street's second national conference, you couldn't fail to be impressed at the strides the dovish Jewish lobbying organization has made in its first three years of existence. It's grown from a germ of an idea into a national organization with chapters in nearly every city with a significant Jewish community.

To the distress of many longer-established Jewish voices, it has created a clear space in the community for itself and for its brand of open — meaning critical — discussion of Israeli policy.

Liberals identify it as the go-to address for Jews who sympathize with the left wing of Israeli politics. It has united and partially overshadowed the flock of left-leaning groups that have long tried to occupy that space. It has entered the media's lexicon as the fast-rising alternative to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a label it didn't ask for but never entirely rejected.

Where it hasn't yet made a dent is in the very place it intended to have its main impact: Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy. The Israeli government studiously ignores it. Israel's embassy in Washington didn't send a speaker to address the conference. Five Knesset members from the opposition Kadima and Labor parties came to speak at the conference, but they did so over the protests of government officials.

The Obama administration didn't shower it with love, either. It sent Middle East policy coordinator Dennis Ross to address the conference, but his speech was diffident, less a call to action than a low-key analysis of the new complications troubling the waters from Cairo to Tehran.

The contrast with J Street's 2009 conference couldn't have been more stark. Back then the White House was represented by its star policy pitchman, then national security adviser James Jones, who laid out the Obama team's bold plans and welcomed J Street as a partner. Ross appeared more as a journeyman infielder, a veteran of every administration since Reagan and a living symbol of the conflict's intractability.

The crowd didn't make things easy for him. Mostly, Ross's comments were greeted with stony silence, interrupted only rarely by tepid applause. He even paused at one point and suggested that applause would be appropriate, but none came. His few attempts at humor got no response. The J Street crowd just wasn't that into him.

The crowd warmed up only when Ross left and was followed by a three-person panel discussing his talk. The warmest reception went to former Israeli negotiator Daniel Levy, who issued a fiery

call for greater American attention to Arab struggles for freedom and democracy. He recalled that when he heard Israel praised as the only democracy in the Middle East, "I was always hoping that we would embrace that as a lament and not an aspiration." He called for America not to "indulge" Israel in a fantasy that it "can allow things to continue as they are."

Levy's salutes to Arab democracy and warnings against Israeli inertia caught the crowd's mood perfectly. He got 10 rousing ovations in the space of 11 minutes. Ross, by contrast, got 10 limp ovations in 40 minutes for his, um, salutes to Arab democracy and warnings against Israeli inertia.

That plenary session was a microcosm of the conference overall, and perhaps of J Street itself. As alert readers recall, the organization set itself twin goals at its launch. It aimed to influence Washington's Middle East policy and promote Israeli-Palestinian compromise, while also fostering a freer, more open debate on Israeli policy within the Jewish community. It sought to embrace both the button-down world of movers and shakers and the voluble, free-wheeling protesters who criticize the mainstream community's lockstep pro-Israelism. Three years later, it has made progress toward accomplishing only half of its mission: broadening the debate.

The organization's official spokespersons, from founder-president Jeremy Ben-Ami on down, speak at every opportunity of their commitment to Israel's security and flat opposition to boycotts or sanctions, stances that should please old-line Zionists and mainstream community activists. At the same time, the conference gave a spot on a panel to the pro-boycott Jewish Voice for Peace, winning almost tearful plaudits from leftists grateful to be welcomed at last in an organized Jewish gathering.

Simultaneous panel discussions over the conference's three days ranged from the challenges of a shared Jerusalem to the tensions facing Jewish students on campus, defining American security interests in the Middle East and fostering civil discourse in synagogues. Dozens of Israeli peace activists came and spoke, creating an electric new sense of common cause with the American Jewish peace activists. The opening gala gave heroes' honors to a Palestinian peace advocate and a Sheikh Jarrah anti-settlement protester.

Missing, however, was any real engagement with the other side of the argument. Israel's hopes were explained far better than its fears. Mainstream Jewish lobbyists and fundraisers were not given a podium to articulate their worries about a divided community. Settlers were present only as theoretical threats, never as believers in a promise or families with homes.

More important, the conference lacked all but token representation of Israel's pro-peace mainstream. For an organization hoping to forge a new, pro-peace American Jewish mainstream, that was a glaring hole. In the past four months the Netanyahu government has replaced the entire top echelon of its defense and intelligence establishment, which favored peace talks with Syria and opposed attacking Iran, and installed a new cadre that shares the right's militarist views. A similar upheaval is brewing in the diplomatic and foreign policy establishment. Israel's disgruntled realists are the Israeli peace lobby that needs a counterpart here. The Sheikh Jarrah protesters deserve praise, but they won't move Congress.

During a press briefing, Ben-Ami said his group was trying to reach beyond its fellow progressives in Israel to work with "realists" who share some common ground. The comment was unintentionally revealing. If J Street and its supporters aren't going to stand in the middle ground represented by Israel's realists, who will?

Contact J.J. Goldberg at goldberg@forward.com and follow his blog at blogs.forward.com/jj-goldberg/

New York The Jewish Week
Connecting the World to Jewish News, Culture, and Opinion

J Street Not Left Wing
By Edmund Mander
March 8, 2011
http://www.thejewishweek.com/editorial_opinion/letters/j_street_not_left_wing

Having returned from J Street's annual conference in Washington, I find myself mystified by the terminology in your article ("J Street Copes With Its Left Flank At Conference," JTA, March 4). I believe in individuals' rights to representative government in a sovereign country, to own and enjoy their private property without fear of its seizure, to move around without hindrance and generally to engage in the pursuit of happiness. Such American — and Jewish — values are espoused across the political spectrum. Why then, do they suddenly become "left wing" when they are aired at a J Street conference, in the context of the Palestinians?

I am equally bemused how anyone supporting the continued occupation of the West Bank could possible be described as pro-Israel. The status quo, with its expansion of settlements, destruction of Palestinian property and humiliating denial of basic civil liberties, offers the most effective recruiting tool imaginable for extremist organizations bent on Israel's demise. If we are to secure Israel's future as a democratic Jewish state, which is J Street's raison d'être, we must bring the occupation to an end and replace it with an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel.

J Street's call for an end to the occupation is moderate, not left wing, and very pro-Israel.

THE JEWISH CHRONICLE

J Conference connected young people to Israel
By Aliyah Donsky
March 18, 2011
http://thejewishchronicle.net/view/full_story/12387188/article-J-Conference-connected-young-people-to-Israel-

The Israeli-Palestinian issue is generally frustrating. On that I think we all agree. Yet I, and many of my peers, find that frustration to be rooted in a very particular problem.

Peter Beinart, who will be speaking Thursday, March 17, 7 p.m., at Rodef Shalom Congregation, aptly defined this source of frustration in his now infamous article on young American Jews. As he wrote, the Jewish establishment has indeed spent decades asking American Jews to check their liberalism at Zionism's door, and we, our community's future, have been mistakenly left to feel as if our profound passion and devotion to Israel is irreconcilable with our belief in open debate and human rights. Frustrating is putting it mildly.

So, it was much to my joy that I saw that disenchantment finally meet its match at the national J Street conference in Washington, D.C., just three weeks ago. Put very simply, the conference was inspirational. As a student, my experience began on Friday night with a shabbaton for student leadership. It was a powerful Shabbat, characterized by open, honest discussion about our connections to Israel and investment in the greater Jewish community.

That powerful sense of promise was magnified immensely as the conference itself began, honoring three leaders who "give voice to our values": Peter Beinart, Sheikh Jarrah leader Sara Benninga, and physician and founder of the Daughters for Life Foundation Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish. During the next two days, I joined more than 2,000 participants, including 500 students from 128 universities, nearly 60 members of Congress, and five Knesset members for a series of panel discussions and plenary sessions intended to create a true space for constructive discourse.

These names and numbers are indeed impressive for an organization that is only three years old, and the words spoken during those discussions were often mesmerizing. And yet, one of the most inspirational parts of my experience occurred beyond the walls of the packed sessions, on a more personal level.

In between the scheduled events, the attendees stood in the hallways doing what Jews are wont do to — we schmoozed. But this wasn't just ordinary schmoozing; it was a genuine discussion of the passion and the facts, of the emotion and the evidence that are all fully a part of the impossibly complex conflict.

These conversations became a venue for a real dialogue inclusive of the inevitable differences in personal opinion. Yes, there are differences in opinion among American Jews, and it is these

differences that made the discussions amongst attendees so inspirational. They were differences dealt with not as conflict, but as conversation.

I had the great privilege of speaking on a panel that discussed the import of this kind of conversation. Titled, "The Campus Challenge: Changing the Conversation in an Environment of Extreme Polarization," the panel focused on creating a space on campus for the wide range of exposure, experience and opinions within the Jewish community. As a member of Princeton Hillel's board of directors, I am deeply invested in the progress of my local community and firmly believe that, on both a local and national level, as individuals and as an organization, J Street demonstrates that we do not compromise our beliefs by including others in this conversation.

This balance was struck at the conference by two major, common tenets underlying these discussions. As I witnessed, we are able to broaden our tent because, as put by J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami in his opening remarks, "We are passionately and unapologetically pro-Israel [and] we believe that the future of Israel depends on achieving a two-state resolution to the conflict with the Palestinian people." This core belief is paired with the understanding that, as American Jews, our connection to Israel is our connection to the conflict, and, thus, we have a unique role to play — in standing for an American foreign policy that reflects these tenets, and an Israel that lives up to the best of these traditions.

A central pro-Israel, pro-peace flag encircled by a united, and still diverse, movement — this was the model of dialogue that took place at the national conference, and it must be the model. The inspirational power of the conference came from seeing "the talk" made into "the walk." That weekend demonstrated to all of us in attendance that disenchantment has no place — and, particularly to young Jews such as me, that a space exists for us to have these passionate and necessary conversations within the context of our deep commitment to Israel. By pairing passion with promise, we have made tangible progress toward the kind of dialogue that will lead to real peace and security for Israel and the entire region.

(Aliyah Donsky of Pittsburgh is a freshman at Princeton University.)

JewishJournal

Why I support J Street
By Rabbi John L. Rosove
March 9, 2011
http://www.jewishjournal.com/opinion/article/j_street_knesset_congress_washington_dc_israel_president_obama_20110309/

I joined more than 2,400 pro-Israel, pro-peace activists — students and American and Israeli leaders, including five members of the Knesset, dozens of members of Congress and 100 rabbis, last week in Washington, D.C., at J Street's second national conference.

Although I am the rabbi of a congregation, I went as an individual representing no one but myself. I did so as a committed Zionist who loves Israel, who worries about her security and who wishes her to remain a strong, Jewish, pluralistic and democratic state.

We convened at an extraordinary time as revolution sweeps across the Arab world. I have been moved and inspired by the masses of young people leading the way in so many countries who desire nothing more than dignity and freedom. It should be clear by now that these revolutions are not about Israel or America. We Jews who cherish our own freedom and independence as a nation cannot begrudge the same for others, including the Palestinians.

J Street recognizes that the status quo of Israeli control over the land between the Jordan River and Mediterranean Sea will not hold. Among the most significant messages of this conference was that as Israel's friend and most important ally, the United States must put forth a bold vision for two states living side by side, independent and secure, moderate, democratic and free, before it is too late. Many speakers, American and Israeli, called upon President Obama to visit the region soon in order to jump start negotiations that will lead to an end-of-conflict agreement before September when the United Nations is expected to vote on Palestinian statehood, which instead should be negotiated between the parties.

No one said an agreement will come easily, but as we learned from the leak of the Palestine Papers, 35 separate negotiating sessions led former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in 2008 to resolve 95 percent of the issues between them. Olmert was even prepared to take the deal to the United States, the United Nations and other international groups to gain support.

Israeli and Palestinian leaders each acknowledged that the contours of the final status agreement are known. Orit Zuaretz, a Kadima MK, told us that now all we need is "a responsible adult to bring the two sides together." Speaker after speaker pointed to the need for a muscular American President Obama to lead the way. The Israeli journalist Bernard Avishai said we don't need merely a facilitator, we need a leader, quipping, "I'd be happier with a little more Dr. Kissinger and a little less Dr. Phil."

The conference included a day of lobbying on which 600 people descended on Capitol Hill to ask members of Congress to sign a letter urging President Obama to maintain the current level of

foreign aid to Israel ($3 billion) and the Palestinian Authority ($500 million), and not diminish foreign aid generally. I visited the offices of U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Reps. Brad Sherman (D-Sherman Oaks) and John Garamendi (D-Walnut Grove). Attending the conference with me were 100 Southern California Jews out of the region's 6,000 J Street members (there are 170,000 members nationwide) and about 10 local rabbis.

The Talmud teaches that the Second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed because of sinat chinam, gratuitous hatred between Jews. The conference focused on this enmity that, like a cancer, is corrupting the soul of the people of Israel. Our community here and in Israel must be able to engage openly and constructively on the challenges at hand without threats, intimidation or accusations that J Street is, in particular, an alien "other" outside the Israel camp. At a time in which Israel is the target of an international delegitimization campaign, it is sadly ironic that some Jews have sought to delegitimize important voices in the Jewish community, such as the pro-Israel J Street.

The conference showed that one can love Israel while wrestling with the changes taking place throughout the Middle East, embrace democracy and freedom for everyone and support a two-state solution to this conflict.

Though we American Jews must always defer to Israelis to make the difficult decisions that will affect Israel's security, we American Zionists must speak up and urge the United States to put forth soon a bold vision that both Israelis and Palestinians can embrace.

There is so much about which to be proud of Israel. I wait fervently to be proud of the peace of the brave that Israel will make with its partners in the Palestinian Authority.

Rabbi John L. Rosove is the senior rabbi of Temple Israel of Hollywood and is a member of the J Street Rabbinic Cabinet.

THE JERUSALEM POST
Israel's best-selling English daily and most-read English website

Editorial: J Street's fragile alternative
February 27, 2011
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By some of the positions it takes and some of the company it keeps, J Street risks sabotaging its laudable endeavor to present a viable left-wing pro-Zionist alternative to American Jews.

JStreet's growth in the three years since its establishment is impressive. Its "Giving Voice to Our Values" conference, taking place this weekend in Washington, has drawn over 2,000 attendees, it says, compared to 1,500 a year and a half ago when it held its first such national event. Thirty organizations are participating (up from 20 in 2009), with over 500 students (up from 200 last time) and over 50 members of Congress attending (compared to 44 last time).

In theory, all lovers of democracy and diversity of opinion should welcome J Street's rise, as a mark of its success in fostering a fundamentally pro-Israel stance even among younger American Jews who might feel alienated from more mainstream organizations' perceived "Israel right or wrong" position. In practice, however, the concern is that J Street has been stretching too thin its "big tent" of opinions, to incorporate elements of the extreme Left, risking in the process leaving out in the cold American Jews with an unabashedly pro-Zionist sensibility.

This seemed to be the message sent out Saturday night by Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center, in the conference's opening speech. Though proclaiming himself to be "among J Street's most fervent fans," Saperstein nevertheless expressed concern over J Street's recent attempt to block an American veto of a UN Security Council resolution condemning Israel's settlement policy beyond the Green Line as "illegal."

"If you alienate your mainstream support you risk losing everything," he noted.

In recent weeks J Street lost the backing of a key politician, Rep. Gary Ackerman, the former chairman of the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, over its opposition to the US veto. In a damning January 25 press release, Ackerman accused J Street of being "so open-minded about what constitutes support for Israel that its brains have fallen out."

THE CHOICE of speakers underlines the concerns. The organization has invited Rebecca Vilkomerson, executive director of Jewish Voice for Peace and an adamant proponent of BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) against Israel, to address the conference. In June of last year JVP campaigned to get the US teachers' pension giant TIAA-CREF to divest from numerous Israeli companies, such as Bezeq and Elbit, that purportedly profit from the "occupation."

Formally, in an eminently reasonable position, J Street opposes all forms of BDS. Instead, it focuses on "creating the political will and atmosphere necessary in the US to promote strong

leadership to achieve a two-state resolution to the conflict." But by associating with pro-BDS groups, J Street undermines its own positive message.

Similarly, as regards another speaker, why should J Street risk alienating its own core constituents by associating itself with Mustafa Barghouti, secretary-general and founder in 2002 together with the late Edward Said of the Palestinian National Initiative, an organization created out of protest against the Oslo Accords? In October 2008 Barghouti, another BDS advocate, took part in a Free Gaza Flotilla that, after initial resistance, was given permission by the Israeli Foreign Ministry to anchor in Gaza.

A third speaker at the conference is Michael Sfard, an attorney who advocates international "lawfare" against Israel. Sfard recently told Amnesty International's website that he was "lucky" to bring a lawsuit in Canada against a Canadian firm for building in Modi'in Illit and hoped to pursue similar cases in Spain, England and Belgium.

According to NGO Monitor, Sfard also testified as a paid expert witness on behalf of the PLO in a lawsuit brought in a US Federal Court in Miami by terror victims of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a terrorist group indirectly tied to the PLO.

THE DANGER is that, by some of the positions it takes and some of the company it keeps, J Street risks sabotaging its laudable endeavor to present a viable left-wing pro-Zionist alternative to American Jews. Ackerman, for one, has made up his mind.

"America really does need a smart, credible, politically active organization that is as aggressively pro-peace as it is pro-Israel," he said in his press release last month.

"Unfortunately, J-Street ain't it."

THE JERUSALEM POST
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Encountering Peace: Learning from J Street
By Gershon Baskin
February 28, 2011
http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/Article.aspx?id=210245

Why can't we bring 2,000 Israelis together for an intensive three-day seminar focused on justice, democracy, peace and security?

I am writing from Washington DC, where I'm attending the second annual conference of J Street, together with more than 2,000 American Jews from all walks of life, four MKs from Kadima and one from Labor.

There are a number of other Israelis representing various peace and human-rights organizations.

The opening evening was dedicated to honoring heroes of peace and courage who most Israelis would not know. Each of them received a standing ovation. One of them was Peter Beinart – author, journalist and Jewish philosopher who, in June 2010, wrote an essay in the New York Review of Books, "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment," that now serves as the manifesto for liberal American Jews, and provides them with a voice against accusations that they have abandoned their Jewish identity and affinity for Israel because they are critical of the policies of its government.

Another was Sara Benninga, a young Israeli who, growing up in west Jerusalem, was not particularly engaged in any political activity until Israel decided to remove several Palestinians from their home in Sheikh Jarrah, a few kilometers away. The blatant injustice was the claim that the original Jewish owners from prior to 1948 had the right to reclaim their property, while the Palestinians who had been removed from their homes inside Israel in 1948 had no right to reclaim their property.

This act of injustice touched the soul of Benninga and hundreds of others, who decided to raise their voices, and have done so every Friday afternoon for the past two years in Sheikh Jarrah, and now in Silwan and in other locations. Benninga and many others have been arrested several times, and face trial on charges of illegal gatherings and trespassing.

The third was Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish from Gaza, who is better known to the public. His three daughters and one niece were killed by tanks shells in their own home during Operation Cast Lead. The shelling was an error by the IDF. Abuelaish, a physician who also worked at Sheba Medical Center at Tel Hashomer, has now dedicated his life to preserving the memory of his daughters by seeking justice, not revenge. His translation of seeking justice is to bring peace.

It is hard to imagine these three heroes being awarded such an honor within Israel. The first two would likely be considered "self-hating Jews." Many Israelis would be glad to see Benninga and

her friends (this writer amongst them) behind bars for treason. Abuelaish received wide exposure in Israel immediately after his daughters were killed. It was later reported that he decided to emigrate to Canada. I spoke with him after the ceremony, and heard a man with a burning desire to reach out to Israelis and make them understand that we must put an end to the conflict.

ON SATURDAY I attended a demonstration of several hundred American Arabs in front of the White House calling for freedom, democracy and liberation from dictators. The various communities took the megaphone in turn, shouting out: "Free Libya!" "Free Bahrain!" "Free Yemen!" "Free Syria!" and one young Palestinian woman with one small Palestinian flag shouting "Free Palestine!" It was fascinating to watch these people with their nations' flags chanting "the people united will never be defeated," each one of them with deep concern about their loved ones facing the violence of despots who refuse to give up their thrones.

How sad that the men in the White House have supported those despots and tyrants over the years, defending stability and oil rather than human rights, democracy and justice.

I raise my voice in support of the three heroes of the J Street conference, and with the heroes of the Middle East from Tunisia to Egypt to Libya to Bahrain, Syria and Yemen.

Their struggle for freedom, human rights and dignity is my struggle. Abuelaish called it the struggle for human values.

They want what I want, and what most Israelis want. We would not want to live without human dignity and justice.

What could be more appropriate for us as Jews than to celebrate people in the region standing up against oppression and for freedom? When the Palestinians ultimately take to the streets (because the revolutions throughout the region will not stop at the gates of the West Bank and Gaza), I hope they will also use the power of nonviolence. If they do, I and many others will be on the front lines with them, liberating them from our occupation, and liberating us from occupying them.

I felt at home in the J Street conference. The passion of expression there emanated from a deep sense of Jewish identity and a love of Israel. The criticism against the government – and the policies of most governments since 1967 – came from a sense of deep pain, concern and fear that Israel is becoming the kind of state they will no longer be able to support. As that happens, a piece of their soul is being destroyed.

I can only ask myself, why aren't all Jews here? What don't all Israelis support the principles of J Street? Why can't we bring 2,000 Israelis together for an intensive three-day seminar focused on justice, democr acy, peace and security? We have a lot to learn from J Street.

The writer is co-CEO of the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (www.ipcri.org), and is in the process of founding the Center for Israeli Progress (http://israeli-progress.org).

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Is the administration in retreat on the peace front?
By D. Bloomfield
March 2, 2011
http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/Article.aspx?id=210544

Today the US gov't apparently sees the prospects as so bleak it is reluctant to risk any more political capital on active mediation as a difficult election year approaches.

It wasn't a white flag of surrender, but it sure seems like the Obama administration is beating a retreat from the Middle East peace process it once embraced with great enthusiasm.

Administration officials still talk about working to bring the parties together, but the truth is that neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians seem much interested, and officials here have finally gotten the memo.

Veteran negotiator Dennis Ross dashed the hopes of many at the second national conference of J Street – the self-described pro-Israel pro-peace lobby – when he said that as the winds of unrest sweep across the Middle East, the prospects of progress toward peace are being swept away.

Delegates were disappointed to hear that the administration doesn't know when or even if Israeli and Palestinian leaders will be ready to sit and talk with each other. Even indirect talks appear iffy.

A similar message also came from the top UN Middle East envoy, Robert Serry, a Dutch diplomat, as he made his rounds of briefings in Washington in recent days.

But the toughest language came from German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose office leaked the contents of a tense phone call in which she reportedly told Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu last week his false statements and failure to keep promises contribute to Israel's growing international isolation.

According to German sources, she told Netanyahu she was "disappointed" that he had not taken "a single step to advance peace." She was said to be highly skeptical when he told her he was considering a new peace initiative. Other European leaders are said to share her anger.

One source in Washington suggested Netanyahu is talking to the GOP House leadership about addressing a joint meeting of Congress when he comes here in May for the AIPAC policy conference. His purpose would be to try to portray himself as the peace seeker, and focus international attention on the Palestinians as the obstructionists.

J Street enjoys reasonably good access to the White House, meeting even with the president, and was energized by his early enthusiasm for pushing both parties to the peace table. But after a false start last autumn, the enterprise collapsed.

TODAY THE administration apparently sees the prospects as so bleak it is reluctant to risk any more political capital on active mediation as a difficult election year approaches, especially when so few in Congress appear inclined to back it.

J Streeters were stunned that Ross didn't speak more about the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and focused mostly on Egypt, leaving the impression that the peace process was being shelved.

"It's not what he said, it's what he didn't say," one activist told me. "There are more than 2,000 people here who support the administration's peace policy and want it to succeed. He could have galvanized that support, but failed. He could have said we're doing everything we can to bring peace, but he didn't."

Ross said: "We will continue to press both sides to engage seriously in negotiations" and meetings will continue between the Quartet and the two sides, but even that was vague. In listing the administration's priorities, "the push for peace between Israelis, Palestinians and their Arab neighbors" was mentioned only in passing, and clearly without the sense of urgency J Streeters wanted to hear.

UN envoy Serry is telling people here that the Palestinian Authority fears the unrest sweeping the Arab world will engulf the West Bank. Palestinian youths are saying they have two lousy choices, Fatah and Hamas, and a not-very-hopeful future. The PA, he said, worries that the youths will rise up against the establishment.

As a result, Prime Minister Salam Fayyad is trying to negotiate a truce with Hamas and head off possible internecine violence, but if the past is any indicator, he will fail.

Meanwhile, President Mahmoud Abbas has retreated to the Yasser Arafat position, minus the violence, Serry reportedly said.

Abbas has decided to bypass direct – and possibly even indirect – talks with Israel in favor of going to the UN with various resolutions, culminating in a recognition of statehood. He knows that this will fail – as Ross warned in his J Street speech – but his real goal is to force the US to table its own peace plan, which he expects will be much closer to his position than Netanyahu's.

The J Street delegates wanted to hear a rousing call to action by an administration determined to reinvigorate a moribund peace process, but beyond the confines of the Washington Convention Center there seemed to be little enthusiasm for the enterprise.

THE JERUSALEM POST
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The Jewish state, out of context
By Nachman Shai
March 3, 2011
http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-EdContributors/Article.aspx?id=210391

J Street's activities are important, but dialogue between world Jewry and Israel – should be conducted internally, within the Jewish people.

Adapted from a speech the Kadima MK and former IDF spokesman gave at the J Street conference this week.

Sometimes, serving as a member of Knesset involves exceptional challenges. You find yourself in all kinds of situations. A week ago, I enjoyed one of those rare opportunities offered to parliamentarians. For the first time in Israel's history, a race was held from the bottom to the top of Masada, one of Israel's best known – and steepest – historical sites.

As an amateur runner, I accidentally found myself participating as the most mature contestant.

While I was running the 1.5 miles and climbing the 750 steps to the top, I had time to think about Masada. It stands out as a symbol in Jewish history – a symbol of heroism, but also a symbol of extremism, of the Jewish tragedy of the loss of independence and of the heavy price the Jewish people pay when they split into sects.

We are now approaching the period of the Third Temple, and must learn from our history, especially how not to repeat it.

The moral of the story is one of moderation, of where Israel stands relative to the world, of the willingness to compromise to ensure an independent state with defensible borders.

I RESPECT the passion and involvement of many J Street participants concerning Israel; it is an important asset that we need to be proud of. Attendants came to Washington from all across America to support J Street, but also to promote the State of Israel.

We are a small people, and the number of us who are emotionally invested in this country is even smaller.

Beyond that fact, we must not allow a situation to occur, like at Masada, where we are divided so radically along political lines that our very survival is called into question. We are too few, only two generations after the Holocaust, to allow ourselves the luxury of creating such a rift within the Jewish people.

There is no question that J Street's activities are important, but the dialogue between the organization and Israel – or world Jewry as a whole and Israel – should be conducted internally, within the Jewish people. The questions J Street raises, which are legitimate and serious warrant answers. The State of Israel and its representatives, official and otherwise, should give them.

That is part of the reason I went to the conference – because I am also one of those people who can help provide some answers.

At the same time, I believe that we should not and must not call on external pressure or coercion to be placed on the State of Israel and its positions. The internal Jewish dialogue is one thing; Israel as it is seen by the world is something else.

There are opinions that are expressed, which are occasionally controversial, within the Israeli discourse, and that are then used by Israel's enemies against it.

We don't need to hide our disagreements, but we should be aware that what we say in these internal conversations can have different meanings when taken out of context.

I WAS born in Palestine, grew up in Israel, and joined the political world less than three years ago, not because I was looking for a job, but because I feel responsibility for the next generation. By "next generation," I mean not only Israelis, but Jews all over the world.

My greatest concern is to maintain Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, and I am sure many feel the same.

There must be an open dialogue between Israel and Diaspora Jewish communities, in which neither side hides its criticism, and in which the criticism is not automatically condemned as delegitimization. We Israelis need to learn how to better distinguish between some constructive criticism and anti-Israel sentiment.

But it must be understood that Israel is in the midst of an international struggle against delegitimization, and some criticism can unintentionally feed that struggle. The challenge is to find a way to air critiques without aiding those who seek to question Israel's very existence and create a rift between Israel and much of Diaspora Jewry.

AND NOW, to return to the steep – and sometimes slippery – slopes of Masada.

While I was running, I looked back like Lot's wife. Unlike her, I didn't become a pillar of salt.

But I did see that some of the runners – and all of my Knesset colleagues who participated in the race with me – were still climbing the mountain. That is what Israel needs to find at the end of the day – a good place in the center of the climb.

אהבה סיפור - מבקרים .סטריט יי'וג ישראל
גילה דוידי
March 4, 2011
http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4037415,00.html

היהודי העם של מזכותו הנובעת, בישראל תמיכה בין זהב שביל למצוא והיא ביותר קשה משימה עצמו על נטל סטריט יי'ג בישראל אותנו מבקרים מדוע אז .הרחבה היהודית הקהילה של הערכים מערכת לבין, משלו ובטוחה עצמאית למדינה?

בארצות היהודית בקהילה משמעותי חלק המייצגת, ונמרצת גדולה אמריקנים יהודים חבורת עם ביליתי לאחרונה ופעילים סטודנטים לצד, היהודי בממסד מוכרות ודמויות גמורים אתיאיסטים לצד אורתודוכסים יהודים .הברית היהודית הקהילה את ומכיר ישח כמי .סטריט יי'ג של השניה בוועידה להשתתף כדי בוושינגטון התכנסו כולם .צעירים השלום ולמען, ישראל למען קולם את להשמיע בכדי מתכנסים כשאלפים מאליו מובן זה אין, רבות שנים זה ב"בארה .לדבר עלה ישראל למען ותיק פעיל או כנסת שחבר פעם בכל נשמעו ביותר הנלהבות התמיכה קריאות הכפיים מחיאות .ישראל מדינת של הורווחת לגורלה והחששות התקוות על

הוצגו, מה משום .שסיקרו כפי הוועידה את סיקרו בישראל מסויימים תקשורת כשכלי הפתעתי הייתה רבה, לכן מגמתי סיקור שום .לה מסכנה פחות כלא אף מסוימים ובמקומות ישראל כמתנגדי הישראלית בתקשורת הכנס משתתפי ולהתנכר מהם להתעלם תהיה כישראלים עבורנו האמיתית הסכנה :הקיימת היחידה המציאות את לשנות יוכל לא ועוין להם

את עושים תמיד לא אנחנו, כישראלים
אחת מקשה היא ב"בארה היהודית שהקהילה לחשוב לנו נוח .לים מעבר אחינו את ולהבין להכיר הראוי המאמץ, החברה של העליונה בשכבה מצויים ב"בארה היהודים .ישראל ממשלת של מדיניות בכל תתמוך ותמיד תומכת, שתמכה ומתון כליברלי עצמו מגדיר, ככולו רובו, הזה הציבור .ופוליטית חברתית ובמעורבות בהכנסה, בהשכלה - האמריקנית הצעירים .לה ומחוצה שלו בקהילה ואזרח אדם זכויות למען ופעיל הדמוקרטית למפלגה מסורתי באופן להצביע נוטה .ומשכילים שאפתנים, דעתנים הם - שלנו הצעירים את מאוד לי זכיריסמ, הזאת האדירה בקהילה

זהב שביל
העם של מזכותו הנובעת, בישראל תמיכה בין זהב שביל למצוא והיא ביותר קשה משימה עצמו על נטל סטריט יי'ג מסורת על סמבוססי, הרחבה היהודית הקהילה של הערכים מערכת לבין, משלו ובטוחה עצמאית למדינה היהודי על מעידה שנים כשלוש לפני הקמתו מאז הארגון של המסחררת הצלחתו .חברתי וצדק שוויון, שלום של שנים ארוכת היהודית בקהילה הקיימת, הזו הדואליות עם להתמודד הקיימים הארגונים של ביכולתם משמעותי שוק כשל שהיה כך .בה הצעיר הדור בקרב ובעיקר

החיבור, ישראל מדינת בהקמת וחזו השואה בתקופת חיו היהודית הקהילה של המבוגרים הדורות יכ, לשכוח לנו אסור ומהדת מהמסורת להתרחקות עדים אנחנו .משתנה המציאות אך .מכך נובע אלינו להם שיש מותנה והבלתי החזק הרגשי לא וחשוב - בינינו המאחד את למצוא עלינו חובה .בישראל התמיכה כמו, היהודית הקהילה עם המזוהים ומנושאים .יהודים של קהילה כל המנחים ובערכים בגישות ההבדלים על לדבר לדעת, פחות

היהודים רוב עמדת את מייצגים הם .ישראל של נחושים תומכים הם סטריט יי'ג אנשי :ספק לאיש יהיה שלא הקהילה :ברורה מגמה על עקבי ובאופן מעידים קהל דעת מחקרי .פלסטיני-הישראלי לסכסוך בנוגע האמריקנים

ובמעורבות עמים לשני מדינות שתי עיקרון בסיס על פלסטיני-הישראלי הסכסוך בסיום מעוניינת ב"בארה היהודית .זה פתרון בהשגת ב"ארה ממשלת של ואקטיבית נחושה

בסיוע נשמרים לישרא של הצבאית ועליונותה בטחונה .ובשלום במלחמה ישראל של לצידה הייתה הברית ארצות הממשל של ובמעורבות בתמיכה נעשו הפלסטינית והרשות ירדן, מצרים עם השלום תהליכי וכל ב"ארה של מתמיד מול ישראל למען היהודים אחינו של המתמידה מעורבותה בשל, היתר בין, נוצרו הזאת והתמיכה המעורבות .האמריקני המעורבות בהמשך שיתמוך, באמריקה פוליטי כוח וביצירת השלום תהליך בקידום לישראל מסייע סטריט יי'ג .הממשל פרווייקטים במימון, עובדים הם עימם הקונגרס חברי באמצעות, יתמכו לעולם סטריט יי'ג .באזורנו החיובית האמריקנית ובחתירה אמיתי מדיני תהליך שבקיום החשיבות את אלו לצד יבהירו אך, לישראל הסיוע והמשך "ברזל כיפת"כ .האפשרי בהקדם להסכם

להתעלם לא

עם להתמודדות המתייחס בחלק .ישראל של לגיטימציה-הדה לאתגר בנוגע עמדה נייר ראות מכון פרסם 2010 בינואר של מבקריה עם פעולה לשתף נכונותה הוא לגיטימציה-הדה רשת של המהירה הצמיחה מסודות אחד" כך נכתב האתגר ישראל רבות פעמים, זאת לעומת .ציונים היו אפילו או הציונות שלילת משום מדתמבע אין אם גם, ישראל מדיניות ולהפריד לנסות כדאי, לכן .לגיטימציה-הדה רשת של לזרועותיה אותו דוחקת ובכך אותה שמבקר למי קרה כתף מפנה ?אומרים איך ."רים'לגיטימטו-הדה עם ועימות למיניהם המבקרים עם יחסים מערכות טיפוח באמצעות הקבוצות שת בין "נגענו לא".

זה האם .גסה כטעות מהדהדת, אורן מייקל ר"ד ב"בארה ישראל שגריר של וההחרמה ההתנכרות מדיניות, זה במובן כשהוא ישראל את משרת אורן האם ?האמריקנים היהודים מרוב להתעלם, ישראל של החוץ מדיניות את משרת באמת מחיר גבה שכבר, הסכסוך בפתרון פעילה אמריקנית מעורבות לעודד היא עיקריתה שמטרתו ארגון עם להתדיין מסרב ויושבת פרס שמעון המדינה נשיא :אור קרני כמה היו, לשמחתנו ?שנים עשרות במשך הישראלי מהעם כך כל נורא שלחו לבני ציפי כ"חה האופוזיציה ראש
על שחלקו למרות, מהקהל תשואות שקיבלו והעבודה מקדימה כנסת חברי חמישה והיו הוועידה לבאי ברכה מכתבי .הכנס מליאת בפני בנאומיהם דעתנו

הגדרתה מעצם, דמוקרטיה .ב"בארה היהודים עבור וגם ישראל מדינת עבור גם, וחיוני יסודי ערך היא דמוקרטיה היחידה הדרך .שינויל ניתנות שאינן מעוררות בלתי הסכמות תובעת אינה דמוקרטיה .ומעורבות דיאלוג תובעת סטריט יי'ג את ולהכפיש להפסיק היא, ב"בארה היהודית הקהילה עם שלנו החם הקשר את כישראלים ולקיים להמשיך סטריט יי'ג .להסכים וגם לחלוק, להתווכח, הדלת את לרווחה לפתוח ונציגיה הממשלה על .בו והתומכים בו החברים .שיש תמיכה כל צריכה ישראל, ידמתמ יותר והיום .ישראל של לצידה נמצאת

סטריט יי'ג של המנהל הועד ר"יו, אמריקני-ישראלי ויזם עסקים איש הוא גילה דוידי

U.S. College Media

THE WESLEYAN ARGUS

J Street Conference 2011: Giving Voice to Our Values
By Miriam Berger
March 1, 2011
http://wesleyanargus.com/2011/03/01/j-street-conference-2011-giving-voice-to-our-values/

"We can have both falafel and gefilte fish," concluded Cordova Initiative Chairman Imam Feisul Abdul Rauf to a packed room at the annual J Street conference, which provides of forum for discussion and speakers for the pro-Israel, pro-peace advocacy group. Five Wesleyan students attended the three-day event in D.C. from Feb. 26 to March 1 along with over 2,000 other students, politicians, and peacemakers. Called "Giving Voice to Our Values," the conference included a spectrum of speakers—from American, Israeli and Palestinian policy makers and politicians, community and religious leaders, and an array of NGOs—who coalesced around the common cause of reaching a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict.

"I came to this conference because I was curious," said Elisa Waugh, '14. "I went on Birthright over Winter Break and realized just how little I know about Israel."

Topics discussed over two-days of sessions ranged from the revival of the Israeli left, American Iran policy options, strengthening Jewish and Muslim American relations, and the work of regional NGOs in addressing equity, education, and environmental issues. The conference concluded with a Congressional lobby-day on Tuesday.

Jen Liebschutz '11 was most impressed by Egyptian-born writer and activist Mona Eltahawy, who spoke on Sunday about the broader implication of democracy movements in the Middle East.

"I was really struck by something Eltahaway said," Liebschutz said. "She made it clear that Egypt and the rest of the Middle East are going to be against Israel until the Palestinians have freedom and dignity."

The attendees were not unified in their views of or relationship to the region. But they shared the desire to actively engage with current events and voice their opposition to the status quo of continued injustice and violence.

"It's a matter that I hold close to my heart because most of my family lives in Israel and the conflict affects their lives," said attendee Hadas Werman '14. "That being said, I think it is in everyone's interest to work towards a better future."

"I believe that Israel should be and is better than how it has acted in the last few years, and I was glad to hear this belief echoed at the conference," Waugh said, noting however that it was hard to digest and assess all the information provided.

J Street was founded in April 2008 to promote active American leadership to end the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflict. J Street U, the organization's campus arm, was founded in 2009 to provide a progressive voice for student activists.

Several high-profile figures attended the conference, including State Department Director of Policy Planning Dennis Ross and Gazan peace activist Dr. Ezzeldeen Abu al-Aish, who lost three daughters in the 2008 Gaza war.

WesShalom, a campus peace network affiliated with J Street U, provided funding for the event. Eight students attended the J Street conference last year, including Liebschutz and Berger.

"I wanted to get back involved in the issues and figure out what I can do to spread a clear and coherent message without making people upset," Liebschutz said. "I also really wanted to get more information and hear for myself from smart speakers."

Blogs

YAHOO! NEWS

Israel mulls interim peace plan
By Laura Rozen
March 3, 2011
http://news.yahoo.com/s/yblog_thelookout/20110303/ts_yblog_thelookout/israel-floats-nonbinding-framework-for-palestinian-talks-to-resume

Amid the stalled Middle East peace process, the Israeli government is considering proposing an interim arrangement with the Palestinians. But Palestinian leaders said they would not accept such a provisional arrangement that stops short of settling on final borders for the creation of a Palestinian state.

The Israeli government is "seriously considering an initiative" that would represent a "phased approach to reaching a final peace accord," one Israeli official told the New York Times. The newspaper noted that Israeli officials "have not offered any details on the initiative, but have said that Israel is talking about it with 'relevant parties,' including the Obama administration."
But a spokesman for Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas said Thursday that the option was a non-starter.

"Anything less than an Israeli withdrawal from lands occupied in 1967 is unacceptable to us," Palestinian official Nabil Abu Rdeneh said, according to Israel's Ynet news website. "We oppose the option of a state with provisional borders."

According to a number of Middle Eastern analysts, Palestinian officials fear that their Israeli counterparts may seek to use an interim arrangement to further delay Palestinian aspirations for permanent borders and sovereignty.

"I doubt the Palestinians will be particularly interested in new interim arrangements given the experience during the 1990s in which interim arrangements involving the division of the West Bank into areas A, B and C has become semi-permanent, the five-year transition period has extended itself for almost 20, and the number of settlers increased during the same period of time from 200,000 to 500,000," the American Task Force for Palestine's Hussein Ibish said. "I also think it's unlikely that anybody is going to take very serious risks on peace while the strategic and political landscape in the Middle East generally is so much in flux."

President Barack Obama, in a meeting with American Jewish leaders earlier this week, reiterated U.S. commitment to the security of the Jewish state, while relaying Palestinian doubts "that the Netanyahu government is serious about territorial concessions," participants in the meeting told the Israeli daily Ha'aretz. "Obama also indicated that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was set on establishing a state during his tenure and [would] be amenable to an acceptable deal if offered."

White House Middle East adviser Dennis Ross acknowledged this week that the Obama administration's efforts to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace talks had basically stalled out when the Egypt revolution erupted in January.

But he also urged Israel to recognize that the transformative events under way in the Middle East underscore why it would be a risky miscalculation to delay making a permanent peace agreement with the Palestinians.

"If Israel can view one lesson from the events in Egypt, it is the danger of getting stuck with an unsustainable status quo," Ross said while speaking at a conference for the liberal Jewish lobbying group J Street earlier this week. "Just as the frustrations in Egypt grew over time, we should all recognize that the conflict with the Palestinians will only become more intractable over time."

(Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas met for peace talks in Egypt Sept. 14, 2009: Nasser Nasser/AP.)

+972

J Street Conference 2011: Why this is where it's at
By Dahlia Scheindlin
February 22, 2011
http://972mag.com/j-street-conference-2011-why-this-israeli-is-anticipating-a-very-meaningful-event/

I had been eager to attend J Street's first conference in October 2009, but nothing could have prepared me for the burning energy that drove the event. Aside from high-level discussions, a diverse range of participants representing the full spectrum of Israel- and peace-supporting views, Jews and non-Jews from policy, media, religious, and community spheres – aside from all that, there was a deeply emotional force. Over a thousand people connected to one another, sharing a huge sense of release and relief. Finally, we felt, we can express what we really believe with relation to Israel.

There were tearful outpourings from people who had been intimidated to speak their minds up to now. People told stories about their jobs and their futures being threatened for having expressed their views about Israel.

What did those views amount to? The composite vision of J Street, no matter what its obsessive, fanatical detractors say, is to support Israel by supporting a peaceful, negotiated, resolution to the conflict.

I have always felt committed to both Israel and the peaceful, negotiated resolution to the conflict, hopefully in the most just manner possible. But I felt distant from American Jewry, which seemed to me more interested in fetishizing Israel than knowing it. Even Madmen got this right, in Episode 6:

Rachel sees Israel more as an idea than a country. It is a place for people like her – Jews. Don sees it as Utopia, which the woman explains as according to the Greeks mean two things, the good place and the place that cannot be.

I wanted a place that can "be" – not this improbable fantasy American Jews seemed to conjure. So I left the US for the reality of a not-always-easy place to live. But at the J Street conference in 2009, I felt home again among American Jews: meeting so many friends I had accumulated over years of seeking scattered pockets of people who shared my hopes; encountering like-minded strangers, with a wide (and litigious) intellectual sweep.

One thing made me sad: that I had to come back to the US to reach that kind of electric charge and commitment for change for Israel. There seemed to be something almost absurd about it – all these people spending their time, at their own expense, investing hours and days in thinking about a single topic – Israel – and all the Israelis had to come to America to work on what is so clearly right for our country. After working so hard to become an insider and influence my society from within, I had to go back to America to feel that force for change.

So toward the end of the 2009 conference, I went around to the Israelis who attended and suggested that we meet to discuss how we could bring this energy and direction home. People agreed; several were committed public figures and public servants, including Colette Avital, MK Shlomo Molla, Ami Ayalon, and others – I remember about ten of us sitting over coffee. As we gathered, immediately the happy high seemed to fade and a familiar defeatism took hold; it was quite remarkable – as if just re-creating the Israeli scene reminded us of how few inside it would listen. Still, one point was clear after realizing how repressed American Jewry had been all these years: we were far freer to criticize Israel's self-imploding government policies from inside Israel, than from America.

I wonder what J Street's second conference, which begins Saturday evening, will feel like. Will the initial energy fade? After all, hopes for a peace process rose in September, then crashed and burned precisely as predicted. The two-state possibility, long thought to be teetering, looks dead. J Street itself has been pulled through the mud (see fanatic, obsessive detractors, above) and there have been some uncomfortable moments.

But here are a few reasons to expect some of that same energy at this year's conference, if not more: registration, organizers tell me, is higher than at this point before the last conference – that's before the arrival of folks who just show up.

Another reason is that things have become worse in Israel. The environment is increasingly unfriendly and yes, even threatening, to those who dare to speak what they consider the truth about Israel's failed policies. Just recently, I had the notoriety of being marked by an academic witch-hunt group for a piece here on 972 .

But the situation goes way beyond amateur bully-groups; there is a full-out legislative, media and civil society campaign to ignite and impose exclusive nationalism and stifle dissent. The fact that the Knesset this week came to its senses and dropped the vote on the establishment of McCarthyite parliamentary investigation committees to hassle left-leaning NGOs is brief respite in the face of a larger trend. Now critical Israelis might just need the refuge of J Street in order to speak their minds, like Americans. However, here's a positive development: perhaps as a result of the pressure, activists protesting those trends in Israel are becoming increasingly vocal – and we could use some trans-Atlantic support.

Finally, J Street's mission is vital, because the two state-solution is not dead. The negotiated two-state solution may be increasingly distant. It is true that creative one-state ideas have been floated (and even polled – look for the "confederation" question) that make more sense to me than the typical notion of an imaginary bi-national utopia that will probably quickly turn dystopia. But not so fast – a few exceedingly brilliant minds have argued here about why a two-state solution is still central to Israel's current and future reality. Further, I can imagine no more powerful convergence of minds to address the mind-boggling shifts in the Middle East.

If the J Street conference this year provides the intellectual and emotional incubator for the community of people who support both Israel and Palestinian national realization – not to mention freedom for all people of the region – it will have done a great service to Jews

everywhere. Even before the conference, let me give my bottom line observation about the last one, a year and a half late: J Street – Good for the Jews.

*PS – Mairav and I promise to provide updates from the conference.

+972

J Street Conference Update II: Expanding the two-state camp
By Dahlia Scheindlin
February 28, 2011
http://972mag.com/j-street-conference-update-ii-beyond-the-left-expanding-the-two-state-camp/

One of the biggest criticisms of the left wing and its arguments is that they have failed to convince others outside the left camp. It's not a genuine argument in the long run, given how many top Israeli leaders over the last two decades have at least described sea changes in policy – even if they have not implemented them. But the current challenge of making the policy real is enormous – those who define themselves as left wing in Israel cannot end the occupation alone. Their electoral power is insufficient and their numbers scant.

How can the urgency of ending the occupation, ending human rights violation, reaching a two-state solution and bringing some measure of justice to the region, be conveyed to a broader spectrum of Israelis whose active support is desperately needed? That was the question of a panel at J Street's conference – here is a summary of the analysis I provided.

Data collected in November showed serious opportunities for expansion to the center. In general, there's been a great deal of of talk about working with the center at this conference. There is a strong Kadima presence here – in fact, there are more MKs for Kadima than from any other party: Nahman Shai, Orit Zuaretz, Shlomo Molla, Yoel Hasson – Danny Ben Simon is holding up the Knesset representation for all the left-wing parties on his own.

The Israeli ideological map: Here's how Israeli Jews break down today. When asked to describe themselves in a survey, Israeli Jews break down as follows.

- 45% call themselves "right," 27% are "center" and 17% describe themselves as "left." Twelve percent of Israeli Jews say they don't know.

- The Left breaks down into 7.5% left and 9% "somewhat left" – more than half of the self-defined left-wingers lean center. For the right it's the opposite: 29% are "right", just 16% "somewhat" right – right breaks down into much more than half who feel strongly

- Who are those who don't identify a political leaning? It's a bit hard to gauge. But here are some of their characteristics: They are somewhat disproportionately made up of former Soviet immigrants, who probably don't want to say their political opinions. The fact that they are slightly older than the rest of the population could be a confirmation, as the Russian-immigrant population is significantly older than the veteran Jewish population in Israel; a strong plurality don't state a religious preference. Many also report lower than average income and education. So although we don't know exactly who they are – most of these qualities would put them into a right-leaning camp.

Major opportunities from the center. For the purposes of moving the beyond the left, this data yields critically important opportunities found within the center and the findings are very consistent throughout the survey (and in others). The basic finding is that when it comes to the conflict, the center behaves more like the left than the right.

There are many examples:

- Although just 38% who feel favorable, 73% of the left feels favorable, and fully 52% of the center. There's even 19% of the right who are favorable to an agreement.

- When asked about the country's priorities, 18% of the center respondents placed peace highest – compared to 8% of the right; and in fact 21% of Kadima voters placed peace first, a higher percentage even than among Labor voters (15%).

- Over 80% of the left is dissatisfied with how the Prime Minister has handled the peace process, but also 68% – more than two-thirds of the center. Only 51% of the right is disappointed and that's logical – since the peace process has not yielded the peace they oppose.

- When asked if "a peace agreement is essential for Israel's survival" – again, two-thirds of the center believe this is true, compared to just 30% of the right.

The data also shows the consistent problem regarding young people and support for a peace process. Young people are consistently less interested, more complacent and more actively opposed.

- Just 11% of young people (18-34) place peace as the highest priority for the country, compared to twice as many among the oldest (22%) respondents

- Only 36% – just over one-third – think that peace is essential for Israel's survival, compared to 57% of middle aged respondents, and 63% of the oldest respondents.

- Nearly 60% of the young people believe a peace agreement could hurt Israel's security.

A number of audience members asked why young people are becoming increasingly hard line when it seems so out of character for young people. There are many reasons: growing up during a decade of hopelessness regarding the peace process, the violence of the second Intifada, the two wars in recent years, has not helped. In my analysis, the events have left youngsters unable to place hopes in any form of peace; as a result they cling to an increasingly exclusivist nationalist rhetoric under the banner of Zionism. In this context, the fact that irresponsible opinion leaders in Israel have turned "Zionism" into a litmus test of legitimacy for groups and individuals who express criticism of Israeli policy just legitimizes that self-destructive meaning of Zionism. Wielding a twisted "Zionism" of intolerance, anti-democratic and anti-Arab sentiment in order to banish the realistic, pragmatic critique that is the only true response to the events on the ground is a grave and dangerous mistake.

*The data from this post comes from a survey I wrote and analyzed for a private client, examining Israeli attitudes towards peace. The survey was conducted from 15 October – 5 November, 2010, by New Wave Research, among a sample of 1008 adult Jewish respondents. Margin of error: +/- 3%. The presentation is not yet available on-line.

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J Street Conference Update I: Do Israelis care about peace?
By Dahlia Scheindlin
February 28, 2011
http://972mag.com/j-street-conference-update-i-do-israelis-care-about-peace/

Do Israelis care about peace? Judging from the packed room, this question was on many people's minds following the controversial Time Magazine article arguing that they don't. I presented data and analysis to explore the question; a number of people asked to have the material on-line, so here is a summary of my talk:

Do Israelis care about peace? It's complicated. Data repeatedly shows that at the current moment, Israelis place peace behind other pressuring social priorities of daily life. In surveys from March 2010 and October 2011,* the conflict and peace come in third or fourth place, behind education, security and crime, and poverty.

In March 2010, 10% of people said the conflict was the country's top priority – this rose just slightly to 15% as negotiations began in September, but stalled around the time of the second survey. Note that Arab respondents in March still place the conflict highest, with 27% who chose this as top priority out of a list of eight items.

Americans here at the conference have already asked me on occasion why Israelis are not out on the streets, like their Middle Eastern brethren, demanding that their government reach a peace agreement. The basic explanation is: that Israelis, although they support negotiations, simply don't believe they will work. The JIPP/Truman Institute survey from mid-November (also conducted after negotiations largely stalled) – 57% "impossible"; by January – Peace Index = 70%. The Peace Index from January shows that 70% do not think negotiations will bring peace. A cynical perspective might be that Israelis support negotiations because they don't believe they'll actually produce an agreement that will require concessions Israelis find too painful to make.

Israelis are not convinced peace is positive for Israel. There are deeper explanations than just the belief that peace is not possible. Two long-term deep-rooted themes in the Israeli mentality – existential and security fears, and deep mistrust of Palestinians – are associated with peace and peace efforts for Israelis. Both took on new dimensions in the post-Oslo and post-Second Intifada years.

- The data show that when asked if an agreement could hurt Israel's security, a small absolute majority of 51% say it will and 46% say it won't. The basic assumption many two-state supporters make is that peace is the only route to security. Many Israelis are not convinced. This situation reflects the legacy of the trauma Israelis felt following the Oslo years which in their perception were years of Israeli concessions (never mind the reality) and Palestinian terror,

which was a reality. Israelis may believe that peace is good for long-term security in the abstract, but long term thinking and vision has never held sway in either public or elite opinion in Israel.

- Second, the reigning narrative in Israel is that Palestinians absolutely cannot be trusted to implement an agreement. Sixty-eight percent of Israeli Jews think this is true. The utter lack of trust in Palestinians is of course the primary outcome of the failure of the second Camp David talks and outbreak of the Second Intifada. When Palestinians are offered an agreement, the Israeli mainstream narrative goes, they respond with violence. This was also part of the Oslo legacy as well. These narratives have been nurtured by opinion leaders in Israel for nearly two decades.

- As a result of those narratives, a plurality (43%) have unfavorable feelings toward the notion of a final status agreement, and only 38% have positive feelings.

In other words, for Israelis, a peace agreement raises the greatest specter of Israeli life: security fears – and it depends on trusting the Palestinians, which they still maintain was a mistake. The outcome is that when Israeli Jews were asked about a number of concerns they may have about an agreement, the top-ranking concern is simply that they don't believe the painful concessions such as on settlements and Jerusalem – will be worth it (55% of respondents said this raised serious concerns; 78% in total said this raised concerns.

Israelis support status quo. On the ground, this all means that Israelis are not rushing to make peace happen. When asked if they believe that the absence of a peace agreement leads to a one-state reality and an Arab majority, or if the lack of an agreement just means Israel can continue the status quo – 62% believe the country can continue the status quo. That means that the one of the oldest and strongest arguments of the peace camp – the fear of losing Israel's Jewish majority and maintaining both its Jewish and democratic character – is not enough to tear Israelis away from the belief that status quo is a legitimate and sustainable goal.

The positive messages of peace. There ARE positive aspects to a final status agreement that Israelis recognize – but they simply seem so remote.

- Nearly 60% say peace will help the economy – but the economy's already doing so well, that this isn't such a high priority

- Nearly 60% say peace will increase chances of reaching peace with the Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Syria and Lebanon – but Israelis see life moving right along without that. Remember "eating hummus in Damascus" – was the narrative hope of the 1990s/Oslo; the current narrative is about resignation to geographic isolation.

- Just a small majority of 52% say peace is essential for Israel's survival or to live a normal life. And when we tested the question of whether peace will help curb the threat from Iran – one of Israelis' top existential concerns – the wide majority don't even see the connection (we think this is an opportunity – because the argument can easily be made that making peace will improve Israel's relations with the world, and make it easier to build coalitions against Iran.)

In sum, Israelis support peace in theory; they will probably support it if an agreement is placed before them by an Israeli leader. But as long as this remains such a remote scenario, the

mainstream of Israeli society is not likely to do much to make it happen and would be pretty content if it doesn't. That's why the responsibility of all those who attended this conference is to think creatively and seriously about what can be done. Time is not on Israel's side. As Ambassador Dennis Ross put it in his talk today,

If there is one lesson we can draw, it is the danger of getting stuck in an unsustainable status quo. Just as the dangers in Egypt grew over time, the conflict btwn Israelis and Palestinians doesn't become easier to solve with time, it becomes more intractable with time."

**Most of the data from this post (unless otherwise cited) comes from a survey I wrote and analyzed for a private client, examining Israeli attitudes towards peace. The survey was conducted from 15 October – 5 November, 2010, by New Wave Research among a sample of 1008 adult Jewish respondents. Margin of error: +/- 3%. The presentation is not yet available on-line.*

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At J-Street, new terms describe Israeli reality
By Dahlia Scheindlin
March 2, 2011
http://972mag.com/a-new-language-for-israeli-reality-is-hammered-out-at-j-street/

There was something slightly frustrating about the J Street conference. At times, participants seemed to be discussing the same old problems, wondering why the same old solutions haven't worked, while talking about them in the same old terms.

Meanwhile, the Middle East is undergoing enormous changes with every new minute. Old policies have become slogans, drained of meaning by failure. We need an arsenal of new ideas; empty rhetoric is a liability that must be exposed. You can't take aim at the future with a cartridge full of blanks.

Take one example: "the peace process." At the conference, the columnist Roger Cohen said: "When I hear that word 'process,' I just die somewhere inside." He's right. The two-state solution is still alive and urgent, but the negotiations are dead (they have not "stalled" as the media likes to say). As a result, "**peace process**" now equals "**status quo**," and *this needs to be said until it's clear to all*. There are many other examples.

When old Middle East terminology is increasingly removed from reality, when it distracts or deceives the audience, that's called doublespeak. The J Street conference was at its best when new terms and ideas arose, or when speakers exposed the vacuity of the old ones.
Below are a few suggestions, beginning with big concepts and moving to specific policies – some are mine, some were inspired by the conference. I'd love for readers to add more.
Concepts:

1. Today, support for current Israeli government policies is mistakenly described as "**pro-Israel**." Such support is hereby renamed "**Pro-occupation**," the only accurate, factual description. Whatever the Netanyahu government says about wanting peace and accepting a Palestinian state is doublespeak – all it has done is entrench the occupation.

2. The new meaning of the term "**pro-Israel**" is: active support for a mutually acceptable resolution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict (I personally prefer the two-state solution), and the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state within the 1967 borders – not to mention strengthening **democracy** and **full equality** of all citizens inside of Israel. People who support those developments are "Pro-Israel." Do not confuse the new "pro-Israel" with the old, dead meaning of "pro-Israel" (see #1). Anyone not actively working for such a resolution is against Israel, because the conflict is killing us.

At the conference, Daniel Levy of New America expressed quite beautifully why believing in and striving for a peaceful resolution among two equal partners is the positive, life-affirming approach to Israel: "We are the real community of people who believe in Israel's existence in the

Middle East." The other community believes that **Israel's critics hate Israel's existence, not just its policies** ("they hate us not for what we do, but for who we are"). That community must naturally conclude that "Israel ain't a very good idea," he said, because it can never live in peace in the Middle East. This narrative is used "year after year" to justify the occupation. Since this narrative involves either annihilation by permanent enemies, or the occupation of those enemies which destroys Israeli society from within, there's a good word for people who think that way: **Nihilists**.

After all, if the entire world is made up of bloodthirsty anti-Israel fanatics, the only logical conclusion is that of Philip Roth's bizarre impostor in Operation Shylock: Diasporism.We may as well pack up and go home – thanks but no thanks.

3. On J Street, some confused people seem to believe that J Street carries out "**Delegitimization**." I have a new name for them: "**Right-wing nut-jobs**," or just shamefully, embarrassingly ignorant. (I've also heard the following lately: BEI – Brilliant except [when it comes to] Israel.)

Those people don't have to remain out in the cold: they are invited to return to planet earth, by listening to what J Street actually says. Here is founder Jeremy Ben Ami's opening speech of the conference:

We re-affirm our commitment to and support for the people and the state of Israel. We believe that the Jewish people, like all other people in the world, have the right to a home of their own and we celebrate its rebirth …We marvel at Israel's accomplishments …We value and share the democratic principles on which Israel was founded…We understand that Israel does have real enemies and we defend its right to live in security and peace … We are passionately, unapologetically pro-Israel."

4. Finally, let's update **Zionism**. The term "Jewish and democratic state" served us well in the last century, but now nobody knows what it means. In 2011, I'd like to propose that Zionism means a **democratic home for the Jewish people and all other citizens**, such as the native-born 20% Palestinian minority.

People can be Jewish, not the state, if they want, any way they want. Want to talk about **anti-Zionism**? Imposing religion on citizens is **anti-democratic** and that's anti-Zionist. Infecting **politics with religion** corrupts Judaism and is therefore anti-Zionist. Religious parties, exclusive religious authority over personal status law, legislation against those who are not of the right religion – these are anti-Zionist concepts. By the way, this true anti-Zionism is also usually chauvinist, racist, xenophobic and ethnocentric.

Now here are some here-and-now **policy terms**:

5. **Rejectionist ideological settlers**. Author Bernard Avishai proposes calling them: "The Judeans." I find this appropriate. "Settlers" makes them sound neutral. "Judeans" doesn't take settlers out of the fold – they are still part of the Jewish people. But the term recalls the ancient time when the Jewish people were rent asunder, torn into the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah,

leading to destruction and exile. Let the Judeans prevent such destruction, by coming home to Israel.

6. The "**one-state solution**," should be renamed. On this point, sharp-tongued Lara Friedman, Director of Policy and Government Relations for Americans for Peace Now, was characteristically incisive:

"One state is not a solution, it's an **outcome**. Neither side aspires to share a state. I defy you to tell me how one state actually works." After thunderous applause, members of the audience observed that the one-state outcome will probably resemble an **apartheid state**.

7. "**Israeli-Palestinian peace**" should be used synonymously with "**American security interests**." The **occupation** is synonymous with "**American security liability**." That was the overwhelming agreement of a panel with Brian Katulis, a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress, Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson and Lara Friedman.
8. Supporters of a two state-solution/the creation of a Palestinian state are not necessarily **left** (although they may also be that). Once and for all: Supporters of a Palestinian and an Israeli state are **pragmatic**.

9. The **basic parameters** of a two-state solution: **Consensus**. Call it Clinton, call it Geneva; call it Taba, Saudi or Olmert, conference speakers (including Dennis Ross) reminded audiences time and again that we all know the basic outlines of the plan. Israelis, Palestinians, American Jews and all the leaders know the basic plan. We don't have to love it – we have to get on with it.
10. **Status quo**. Daniel Levy nails this one with the truest possible term: "**suicidal comfort zone.**"

11. **Iran**. It's time to remember that Israel's big "**existential threat**" doubles as "**an existential excuse**" not to make life-saving advances in Israel's foreign policy. Kadima MK Orit Zuaretz should know – she sits on Israel's Security and Foreign Affairs Committee. She said: "They always run to the Iranian threat and it gives them legitimization not to deal with other issues."

My own survey from November 2010 shows that no less than a 69% majority of Jewish Israelis agree that "a deal with the Palestinians will improve Israel's relations with other countries, which will help the world unite against Iran." **Iran** = a **reason to make peace**, not an excuse to avoid it.

Old language perpetuates myths and blinds us to new realities. More accurate language can help expose myths. And developing new terminology or meanings can help drive new ideas – which are desperately needed.

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J Street member responds to criticism of DC conference
By Mark Zivin
March 15, 2011
http://972mag.com/ami-kaufman%E2%80%99s-post-re-j-street-conference-%E2%80%9Ca%E2%80%9D-for-perception-%E2%80%9Cc-%E2%80%9D-for-perceptiveness/

The following is a post written by Mr. Mark Zivin, an active J Street member, in response to my earlier post titled: "The J Street conference: An 'A' for effort, 'F' for results". In my post I claimed that the conference failed where it matters most: bringing major league politicians from Capitol Hill. As you shall soon see, Mr. Zivin thinks I might have been a tad too harsh.

I found Ami Kaufman's recent piece about the J Street Conference to provide some very valuable insight into how the conference was perceived outside of the United States. Part of the problem was not only the lack of media attention (and I would agree that this is a legitimate concern), but there also was a lack of depth and context to the coverage.

Part of the problem is that this conference represents more of an *evolution* in the development of J Street as a movement, rather than a *revolution*. And as we all know, the cutbacks in personnel and budgets in the traditional media make it much harder, at any point in time, for them to justify covering evolutionary progress. And particularly at this moment in time, there just might be a few other revolutionary things going on in the world that would capture their attention before a conference in D.C. So, let me provide some of that context.

Regarding the event itself, Ami failed to look at the numbers. Attendance was up over 50% from 1,500 at the first conference to about 2,400 this year. For comparison sake, the AIPAC policy conference last year had 7,500, including a large contingent of about 750 from Chicago, because a very popular Lee Rosenberg from their hometown was being installed as President. Attracting almost one-third as many people as AIPAC after being in existence for only three years seems quite impressive. Even more interesting, the AIPAC numbers included 750 students; J Street had 500 students. So, J Street was able to do even better with young people. That is significant.

But it is in the area of the "political aspect" where not having the benefit of a broader American political perspective resulted in Ami drawing some very wrong conclusions about the political effectiveness of J Street. There are much better measures of JStreetPAC's effectiveness than looking at the "caliber of speakers". Again, let's look at the numbers. In the 2010 election cycle, JStreetPAC raised more money, over $1.5M, than any other pro-Israel PAC (AIPAC is legally not a PAC and so does not directly raise money for candidates) and 46 of 61 endorsed candidates won (granted many of these were incumbents in Democratic districts).

But, the big story of 2010 that Ami ignored was the huge Republican wave that swept Congress, including more than a few J Street incumbents – which would help explain why there were fewer Representatives at the conference. Here in Illinois, we actually lost two out of four J Street

endorsees who J Street had developed strong relationships with. That scenario played out all across the country.

As for the Republicans, J Street reaches out to them on the Hill, and for the most part they will politely meet with J Street's staff. However, it is nearly impossible to get them to accept an endorsement. There was a very brave Republican Congressman from Louisiana, Rep. Charles Boustany, who was with J Street from the beginning. He is a medical doctor of Lebanese Christian descent. He accepted J Street's endorsement for both 2008 and 2010. Unfortunately, when the whole flap about funding from George Soros emerged, he was forced to drop the endorsement.

And speaking of brave, although "minor league" is one way to characterize the Congresspeople that came to the conference, I know several of them pretty well. I think that more accurate adjectives would be "tough", "fair-minded", and "sincere", in addition to "brave". And, although Ami quoted part of a paragraph from Nathan Guttman in the Forward, he missed the point on two counts. First, he failed to connect the very real political risk that there can be fallout from showing up at the conference with the fact that some people decided not to attend. So we have to really appreciate those that ignored that risk. Secondly, Ami left out the last sentence of Guttman's paragraph:

"But Rep. Lois Capps, another California Democrat who is endorsed by J StreetPAC, said that there is a "noticeable change" in Congress and more openness to listening to other views on Israel."

I have personally heard from many Congressmen and women how thankful they are that J Street exists. It has allowed many of them to be bolder and more outspoken in their positions than they could ever have been if it was not for J Street.

And speaking of political, the day after the conference was "Lobby Day", where hundreds of conference participants went up on Capitol Hill to meet with Senators and Representatives to promote J Street's positions and make some type of "ask" in favor of these views. This year's "ask" was very interesting. Each Congressperson was asked to sign on to a letter that is sponsored by Jan Schakowsky (my Representative) and Anna Eshoo of California. The letter is in support of maintaining the level of foreign aid both to Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The letter is very even handed and this was evidenced by its being the lead article in the Chicago Federation's (JUF) e-newsletter last week. Significantly, J Street was the first group to lobby for this letter on the Hill. My hope is that we will be seeing more J Street actions which will be acceptable to a broader range of members of the Jewish community.

And speaking of Republican, one should be aware of what happened in my home district, Illinois' Ninth. The above mentioned incumbent, Jan Schakowsky, who is Jewish, has been a strong supporter of Israel during her entire 12 years in Congress, and she was also one of the first in Congress to accept J Street's endorsement. And although the mantra of traditional center-right Jewish groups, including AIPAC, has been that support for Israel should not be a political issue, her young opponent disparaged mercilessly both Jan's support for Israel and her acceptance of J

Street's endorsement. There is a large enclave of Orthodox Jews in her district and many of them supported her opponent. Despite this, Jan won handily by margins similar to prior years.

The point being that this served as a test to find out both whether J Street could muster effective political support (which it did by turning out scores of people at key debates and rallies), and whether or not J Street support could actually harm a candidate in a district with a large Jewish population. J Street fared very well on both counts. And, realizing exactly how much a litmus test this district could be, J Street actually conducted very specific polling to be able to do more than judge the results anecdotaly. These poll results indicated that despite her opponent spending over $500,000 and despite the overall Republican trend in the nation, Jan's popularity was unscathed by her association with J Street.

So all in all, to paraphrase Mark Twain, the reports of J Street's political demise have been greatly exaggerated. That isn't to say that J Street has not made political mistakes or that the path forward is going to be easy, but it is to say that J Street has made, and continues to make, a significant difference in the tone of American political conversation about Israel, Palestine and Middle East Peace. And trust me, J Street's leadership and staff didn't spend too much time patting themselves on the back in self-congratulatory revelry. Despite tired minds and bodies, they spent the two days following the conference de-briefing, planning and preparing for what lies ahead. Knowing many of them, they certainly wouldn't disagree with Ami that 2011 is a make or break year. But, rest assured, pep rallies aren't in the plans. How to get to peace is what their sights are set on.

Mark Zivin is a member of J Street's Political Finance Committee and a leader of J Street Chicago, its local branch. He was Treasurer of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, and has been a supporter of major American Jewish organizations for decades. He blogs about politics in general and Middle East Peace in particular at www.beyondzs.com and Tweets at www.twitter.com/Beyondzs.

US Jews Watch Arab Uprisings With Mix of Hope, Concern
By Jerome Socolovsky
March 3, 2011
http://www.voanews.com/english/news/usa/US-Jews-Watch-Arab-Uprisings-With-Mix-of-Hope-Concern-117335633.html

America's six-million Jews have long been politically divided over what's best for Israel's security. Now, those on the left are putting their faith in an Arab democratic awakening, while those on the right are warily watching the developments sweeping the region.

The developments were high on the agenda at two major Jewish gatherings this week - and at a meeting of presidents of Jewish organizations with President Barack Obama.

The first gathering was the annual meeting of J-Street, a Jewish group on the political left, which drew thousands of participants.

While J-Street focuses much energy on opposing Israeli settlement policies, many people attending this year's get-together also hailed the democratic uprisings in Arab countries.

Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb said she wept when she saw Egyptians celebrating the demise of former President Hosni Mubarak.

"Yay freedom!" she said, choking up with emotion once again.

Gottlieb describes herself as a Palestine solidarity activist. Last year she faced Egyptian security forces when she took part in a Gaza Freedom March in Tahrir Square.

"And so I have a feeling of how much courage [they have], especially with people dying all around them, their friends, and colleagues, and family members, to demand democracy," she said.

Another rabbi, Michael Lerner, is editor of the Jewish magazine Tikkun. Early in the Egyptian revolution, he wrote an op-ed piece on the website of the Arabic language news broadcaster al-Jazeera. It was titled: Jewish Prayers for Egypt's Uprising.

Lerner says Jews have sympathized with other peoples' liberation struggles since their own biblical story of emancipation from slavery - as it happens - in Egypt.

"So when we support the Egyptian struggle and the other Arab struggles," he said, "we see this as a very important step towards global freedom for all, which is the one path that we believe is critical for security for the Jewish people and for Israel also."

In recent years, J-Street's membership has soared and it has become an influential voice in the debate over Israel. But the group is still relatively small.

On the other hand, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations represents 50 of the biggest groups. The Conference also met this week in Washington and its members said they expressed their views at a private meeting Tuesday with President Barack Obama at the White House.

Many American Jewish leaders initially saw Mr. Mubarak as a bulwark for peace. But Kenneth Bialkin of the America-Israel Friendship League says they are now encouraged Egyptian protesters did not emphasize religious extremism and for the most part did not express hatred toward Israel during the revolution.

"What we are looking to," he said, "is the question of whether in Egypt and other places, the voice of the people will stress demands for improvement, for Westernizing their society, for spreading the base of participatory democracy, or whether it will set the stage for what happened in Iran."

Iran's 1979 revolution created an Islamic theocracy that has threatened to destroy Israel. Many Jews are especially concerned about Egypt because its peace treaty with Israel, signed the same year as the Iranian revolution, is seen as a cornerstone of regional stability.

But Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, says despite the peace treaty, hatred of Israel and Jews is strong in Egypt. He argues that the country is not ready for democracy and could vote extremists into power.

"If you have a very hostile culture, elections will only elect bad people," he said, noting the militant group Hamas won elections in Gaza.

Although Egypt's military has said it will honor the peace treaty, Klein says America should threaten to cut aid and Israel should threaten to reconquer the Sinai Peninsula to prevent a future Egyptian civilian government from breaking the accord.

J Street frames the debate: "Global Israel" vs. "Greater Israel"
By Byron DeLear
March 5, 2011
http://www.examiner.com/progressive-in-national/j-street-frames-the-debate-global-israel-vs-greater-israel

Washington D.C. — J Street has just completed its second annual conference, "Giving Voice to Our Values" on Tuesday at the Washington Convention Center. The now three-year old Jewish-American advocacy organization offers a pro-Israel, pro-peace alternative to the other more hawkish lobbying group, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).
Over 2400 people attended this year's conference—a 60% increase from 1500 attendees at J Street's kickoff event in late October 2009.

National Security Advisor General James Jones promised at the inaugural event that the Obama administration would be, "…represented at all other future J Street conferences." This year, the White House sent Dennis Ross, a veteran Middle East expert having served the Clinton and Bush administrations, and currently, special advisor to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.
In his keynote, Ross largely focused on the "remarkable transformation" taking place in the Middle East with peaceful protests in Tunisia and Egypt unseating entrenched autocratic regimes—"the sort of thing that in the past would be unthinkable."

Other notable J Street speakers included Professor Eric Alterman, Middle East expert Dr. Kenneth Pollack, author Barbara Slavin, Tikkun's Rabbi Michael Lerner, Just Vision's Ronit Avni, Colin Powell's former Chief of Staff Col. Lawrence Wilkerson—and a surprise presentation by Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg at the gala dinner.

"Global Israel" vs. "Greater Israel"
A potent meme emerged at the conference, which, for me, accurately frames the debate between the two rival Jewish-American advocacy organizations.

"Global Israel"—carried by J Street—and, "Greater Israel", by AIPAC (a.k.a., *Future v. Past*). There is a considerable amount of competitive back-and-forth between adherents of these two groups (putting it mildly), both claiming the mantle of being pro-Israel, but in different ways. Arguments in the turf-war by AIPAC supporters have attempted to delegitimize J Street—that they're not really pro-Israel, or no one should take them seriously—in many cases, the larger group's attacks seem more like bullying, with AIPAC playing Goliath to J Street's David.
Dennis Ross—Obama's messenger to J Street—has been active with AIPAC for many years having addressed the organization's policy conferences numerous times, co-founded an AIPAC sponsored think-tank in 1985, and wrote part of Barack Obama's AIPAC speech in 2008.
After giving a policy statement on developments in Egypt, Ross basically told the J Street plenary—in a dispassionate diplomatic tone—"we're working with each side in parallel, it hasn't played itself out yet, but we'll let you know."

However, on the opening night, journalist Peter Beinart provided context and put some real numbers behind the ineffectual nature of the negotiations that have occurred to date. In the 1980s during the Reagan administration, there were 10,000 Jewish settlers in Palestinian occupied territories—now there are 500,000.

Survival of Israel Relies on Two-State Solution

Last year's conference hammered time and again, by a lengthy roster of individuals sporting unassailable pro-Israel credentials, the necessity for Israel to finally resolve the conflict. Haim Ramon, 26-year Knesset Member and former Israeli Vice-Prime Minister, stated this in no uncertain terms,

"If we will not reach a solution based on a two-state solution, then – and "then" will be very soon – it will be a one-state solution and that means the end of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state."

This year, J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami reprised this note in his opening address, *"The time has come for Israel to choose among three things: being a Jewish homeland, remaining democratic, and maintaining control over all the land between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. Israel can have only two of the three. It can only be both Jewish and democratic by giving up the land on which a Palestinian state can be built in exchange for peace."*
The clock is ticking out due to domestic demographic realities and international political pressure. The increasing growth of inflexible nationalist attitudes and unyielding religious fundamentalism on all sides of the conflict—combined with a global crescendo calling for an end to human rights abuses—has put the status quo on an untenable tract.

But the endless series of talks and negotiations—*Madrid/1991, Oslo/1993, Camp David/2000, Taba/2001, Beirut/2002, Geneva/2003, Annapolis/2007*—haven't produced any satisfactory results, while Palestinian land has been increasingly fragmented by more and more Jewish settlements and settlers.

Mounting Global Pressure for Resolution of Conflict

This perpetual diplomatic runaround has been a contributing factor for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to begin searching for solutions elsewhere. President Abbas is now lobbying for more countries to officially recognize the State of Palestine with Brazil, Argentina, and Peru recently being added to the growing list of over 100 nations including Russia, Poland, and most all of Africa and the Middle East.

"If Israel refuses to freeze settlements, we will ask the US to propose a solution and submit it to both sides. If we fail, we will go to the UN Security Council seeking international recognition of a Palestinian state." ~ President Mahmoud Abbas

Dennis Ross, when queried about this development responded, "The one thing that's been clear all along in this conflict is that unilateral moves aren't going to produce agreements; unless of course, unilateral moves are basically negotiated behind the scenes."

Enter *"Greater Israel",* stage right.
Greater Israel originally refers to the Biblical idea of the "Promised Land" given by God to the Israelites. Today, it's commonly defined as the land of Israel together with the Palestinian occupied territories.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says he wants peace, but if he did, why wouldn't he satisfy the desire of Israel's most trusted ally and staunch supporter, the United States, and put a moratorium on settlement expansion allowing for direct negotiations to begin again? There's a disconnect in the logic.

A 16th century French writer named Michel de Montaigne once intoned, "Saying is one thing, but doing is another." Like Netanyahu, AIPAC claims to want and pursue peace, yet, as recently as February 10th, defended settlement expansion as, "not an obstacle to continued talks." But clearly the expansion is an obstacle to peace, which is why every American administration has opposed Israeli settlement activity in Palestinian territories since the occupation began in 1967.

Voices of Reason and a Role for America
In a panel immediately following Dennis Ross, Bernard Avishai lamented President Obama not publically embracing the well-known two-state deal points to galvanize world opinion, but rather, the administration acting as a sort of behind-the-scenes therapist, or, "mediator to get the parties to '*Yes'.*"

Avishai explains,

"That is not the purpose (only acting as mediator) of an American administration. The American administration in adopting these very well-known principles can create a kind of organized international opinion with respect to what the disposition of this conflict is, and also make an important statement, which is, that the Palestine issue is not the internal problem of Israel alone, and the existence of Israel is not simply the responsibility of the Israeli Army."

Daniel Levy, lead Israeli drafter of the Geneva Accord two-state solution, exasperated on the lack of forward-thinking coming from Ross even while stating, "the status quo is unsustainable."

"If the ambition today is to get the parties back to bilateral negotiations, then that is not commensurate with the challenges we face or with learning from history—if the idea today is to build confidence, 18 years after Oslo (peace talks), between an occupying power and an occupied people, in this situation of power asymmetry— really?"

Both sides in this equation, Israelis and Palestinians, comprise nationalist movements, and in order for a peace deal to be lasting, satisfying these nationalist aspirations—at least partially—is a pre-requisite. However, even with all the main political actors giving lip service to a "two-state solution with Israel and Palestine living side-by-side", there is a considerable amount of evidence that the peace process to date has been more of a slow-walking, delaying action rather than an effective means to ameliorate the conflict.

New York Times columnist Roger Cohen spoke poignantly about the lack of results, "When I hear that word "process", you know I just die somewhere inside—there is no process, there is no peace."

Bernard Avishai then laid out a vision for how the Obama administration could assemble the framework to build an international gravity uplifting Israel into a sustainable relationship with her Arab neighbors, and Palestinians living within her jurisdiction.

"When you set a strategy you're trying to create an overarching scheme for the way in which obstacles will slowly, systematically be overcome…if the "Obama blueprint" (for a two-state solution) is out there, and seems to have the world at its back, that starts to create a kind of ambient pressure on the system…for Palestinians in the streets, it's terribly important to have this overarching thing hanging out there simply to give them a horizon, and a sense of hope, something that the Obama administration had said at the beginning of its journey."

Avishai then identified the crux of the impasse, the biggest obstacle towards a peace settlement, *"From the point of view of the Israeli political system, we're in a kind of interesting bind here. On the whole, Israelis are inclined to endorse the Obama blueprint. The problem comes when they have to confront the one third of Israel that is absolutely—and determined—to obstruct any deal whatsoever for obvious reasons. There are lots of people living in and around Jerusalem supporting the settlement project—let's call them, "The Judeans"—the Israelis living along the coast (Tel Aviv) do not want to confront "the Judeans" for the sake of the Palestinians.*

Let's put it this way, those who believe in "Global Israel" don't want to confront those who believe in "Greater Israel". And they think they don't have to because America is at their back and will always, in effect, coddle Greater Israel, and not make Global Israel have to take a stand."

Bernard Avishai is the appropriate voice to articulate this distinction. As a contributing editor of the Harvard Business Review, he understands the power of regional economic cooperation to uplift societies, bringing entrepreneurial opportunities to their people.

At the last J Street, Avishai spoke about what a Global Israel at peace with her neighbors might look like, "…a two-state solution is really a three-state solution (common-market with Jordan)—it's really a twenty-state solution, because it means developing a relationship with the countries of the Mediterranean through a Sarkozy-like European Union—we have to begin to understand that Israel is not a nation that dwells alone."

It's the interconnected nature of the new world that best favors a Global Israel over Greater Israel, and every moment that moves technology forward into the 21st century will make this contrast even more stark. As our world becomes more seamless, political isolation will no longer be an option for Israel, nor America.

Breaking Down The Fear

Andrew Breitbart's Big Journalism published this attack on J Street,

"Just how extreme and anti-Israel is J Street? Yet despite Obama's tacit support of this dangerous group and his manifest preference for the company of Jew-haters, the vile anti-Jewish J Street is being shunned by K street, Congress, and anyone with an ounce of basic human decency. Only Barack Obama has sanctioned this stain on humanity."

How can people talking about peace, human rights, dignity, be so threatening? Just like protesting Egyptians were threatening to their status quo, so is J Street. There's nothing wrong with talking about human rights, dignity, democracy—people are talking about those things all over the world—why should they stop when it concerns the inhabitants of the Holy Land? The harshest criticisms leveled at J Street reminds me of people burning Beatles records because "Rock 'n Roll is Satan's music." New things can be hard to metabolize for those clinging to old ways.

I think there is value in seeing the future and getting on the right side of history. AIPAC was formed in 1953, shortly after the creation of the State of Israel. I can see how many of its supporters consider AIPAC to be virtually synonymous with Israel, and any organization, like J Street, that emerges attempting to offer a dissenting perspective on what it really means to be pro-Israel, is simply "anti-Israel." But this is two-dimensional thinking in a very dynamic 3d world. There's common ground on which both AIPAC and J Street stand, and a respectful conversation between these two organizations would be good for Israel and America, instead of never sharing a stage or recognizing that diversity of thought is ultimately a strength, not a weakness.

There's a movement going on, and it's a global movement. It's about connecting people-to-people, and reversing old systems that deny basic human rights. It's not unlike what our country went through over two hundred years ago, and then a hundred years later to abolish slavery. Any government that institutionally works to oppress or discriminate people has to realize that reform will happen one way or another—the Facebook and Twitter uprisings in the Middle East have made what were formally theoretical perspectives on social networks, democracy, and interconnectivity, very, very real.

Ten Days Too Late

Egyptian-born journalist Mona Eltahawy spoke at J Street about the overturned Tunisian and Egyptian regimes each coming out during the uprisings and making three speeches and then collapsing—the speeches were "ten days too late". If they had been made ten days earlier, some people might have listened. There are realists now serving in the Israeli government that see the big picture—they need to take decisive action before it's "ten days too late."

In January 2009, I remember speaking at a gathering in an Arabic Bedouin village in Israel about human rights, and introducing them to the constitutional protections we enjoy in America, freedom of expression, religion, assembly, the press. I could feel the visceral reaction of hope they had to this idea—to Americans, the Constitution is like religious scripture, but often taken for granted. Currently, there are no equivalent protections applying to all of Israel's inhabitants, but I venture, someday, there will be.

As an American, I believe we must end the antiquated Cold War thinking in opposing human rights and democracy around the world, and begin to transform our foreign policy into a commensurate relationship with the values we hold. The debate between Global Israel and Greater Israel revolves around the support and amplification of these universal values for all human beings.

Ultimately, we must support the principle—as was said in a classic Star Trek episode by a Jewish Canadian—the values set forth in America's founding documents must apply to all, or they mean nothing.

Weston residents participate in J Street conference in D.C.
March 13, 2011
http://www.wickedlocal.com/weston/topstories/x904834505/Weston-residents-participate-in-J-Street-conference-in-D-C#axzz1GzX1tSDH

WESTON — Paul and Joanne Egerman of Weston traveled to Washington, D.C., to participate in the J Street national conference as part of a delegation of over 120 activists from the Boston area, at the moment the current situation in the Middle East is drawing the world's attention to the region.

J Street's conference "Giving Voice to Our Values" drew over 2,300 activists from across the country, a more than 50 percent increase over its 2009 inaugural conference, including students from 128 campuses. The conference was held Feb. 26 to March 1 at the Washington Convention Center.

Paul Egerman, a member of the J Street National President's Council, said, "This is my second J Street National Conference, and it's an exciting event. It's great to know that my views about Israel are mainstream within the Jewish community. The enthusiasm of the many college students adds an extra dimension."

With a keynote by top Obama administration Middle East advisor Dennis Ross, and talks by dozens of diplomats, members of U.S. Congress, rabbis, journalists, activists and students, the conference provided an in-depth view of many aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the challenges and possibilities for its resolution.

While speakers debated a number of subjects, almost all agreed that recent events in the Middle East demonstrate that an unsustainable status quo will not hold.

The conference was capped by a lobbying day on Capitol Hill, with meetings with some 240 Congressional offices.

J Street is the political home for pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans to advocate for vigorous U.S. leadership to achieve a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with some 170,000 supporters across the country.

The local chapter, J Street Boston, has a supporter base of almost 9,000 and a Rabbinic cabinet of some 40 rabbis, cantors and rabbinical students.

For more information visit our website (www.jstreet.org/boston).

Brookline residents join J Street delegation for conference in Washington, D.C.
March 17, 2011
http://www.wickedlocal.com/brookline/homepage/x1777810715/Brookline-residents-join-J-Street-delegation-for-conference-in-Washington-D-C#axzz1GsmQoUbk

Brookline — A delegation of Brookline residents, including Enid Shapiro and Deborah Katz, traveled to Washington, D.C., to participate in the J Street national conference earlier this month as part of a delegation of more than 120 activists from the Boston area.

Other members of the Brookline delegation included Sarit Shalhevet, Lynne Layton, Sanford Goldfless, Rabbi Emma Kippley-Ogman, Guy Rosin, Marie Hoguet and Aaron Wenner.

With a keynote speech by top Obama Administration Middle East adviser Dennis Ross, and talks by dozens of diplomats, Knesset members, members of U.S. Congress, rabbis, journalists, activists and students, the conference provided an in-depth view of many aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the challenges and possibilities for its resolution.

The conference was capped by a lobbying day on Capitol Hill, with meetings with some 240 Congressional offices.

J Street is the political home for pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans to advocate for vigorous U.S. leadership to achieve a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The local chapter, J Street Boston, has a supporter base of almost 9,000 and a Rabbinic Cabinet of some 40 rabbis, cantors and rabbinical students. For information, visit www.jstreet.org/boston.

J Street Sticks to the Script at its Annual Conference, Despite Coming to a Two-State Dead-End
By Zoe Zenowich and Alex Kane
March 4, 2011
http://www.alternet.org/world/150127/j_street_sticks_to_the_script_at_its_annual_conference,_despite_coming_to_a_two-state_dead-end

When the liberal "pro-Israel, pro-peace" lobby J Street launched in 2008, it was big news. Coupled with a new presidential administration pledging sustained engagement on Israel/Palestine, the thought many had was that this was the moment a lasting peace deal could be forged between the Israelis and Palestinians.

J Street's "No. 1 agenda item," as founder and president Jeremy Ben-Ami told the *New York Times* in September 2009, was to "do whatever we can in Congress to act as the president's blocking back." J Street's strategy of advocating "for urgent American diplomatic leadership to achieve a two-state solution" seemed on mark, given that President Barack Obama told the world in Cairo in June 2009 that he intended to "personally pursue" the two-state solution.

The goal of a two-state solution, in which Israel and a Palestinian state exist side-by-side, remains J Street's message as around 2,400 activists gathered in Washington, D.C. last weekend for the group's second annual conference. "It could not be more urgent for the administration to seize the initiative right now on peace and a two-state solution," said J Street spokesman Isaac Luria.

But what happens when that goal, and the strategy of strong American leadership on the issue, seems out of reach? For some on the left, the current political situation means that J Street needs to adjust to the reality of fading prospects for a two-state solution.

While it's clear, as blogger M.J. Rosenberg put it, that J Street has "opened up room" in the debate over Israel, progressive critics have called for new strategies to pressure Israel, such as the growing boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement. Indeed, even some of J Street's own constituents are frustrated with the Obama administration and are exploring more forceful ways to change Israeli behavior.

For instance, the liberal Zionist organization Meretz USA, which has close ties to J Street, recently came out in favor of a boycott of West Bank settlements. Others at the conference, like Israeli human rights lawyer Michael Sfard, echoed Meretz USA's stance.

"The question of boycott, for me, is very simple," said Sfard. "I cannot imagine a cent of my money being given to settlement products or any activity that is enhancing the settlement projects. For me it is like actively supporting illegal or immoral abuse of others' rights."

The Obama administration's weak stance on the issue has become even more obvious in light of recent events. The administration backed down in the face of the pro-Israel lobby and a right-wing Israeli government that keeps issuing tenders for new illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank, and the Gaza Strip remains under a debilitating siege imposed by Israel. The release by Al Jazeera of the "Palestine Papers," nearly 1,700 leaked documents on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, shows that despite numerous Palestinian concessions on Jerusalem, the right of return and more, the Israeli government refused to forge a deal.

The Obama administration's ambivalence to the continued entrenchment of settlements on Palestinian land--a problem many consider to be the biggest obstacle to a two-state solution--reached new heights with the Feb. 18 U.S. veto of a UN resolution that condemned settlements as "illegal."

"On this issue, Obama has really dropped the ball in a big way," said Rosenberg, a former staffer at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. "He may have set the cause back with that veto, and that veto will reverberate in the progressive camp for a long time."

It was the first veto since Obama took office, and was in stark contrast to past administration calls for Israel to stop settlement expansion. J Street came out against a U.S. veto. There are about 500,000 settlers living on confiscated land in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, and the settlements, along with the separation barrier, have created a disjointed Palestinian landscape that makes a Palestinian state look less and less likely.

"All this talk about the two-state solution is largely meaningless. There is not going to be a two-state solution," said John Mearsheimer, co-author of *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy,* in a recent Institute for Middle East Understanding press briefing. "The Israelis are in the driver's seat here and they want to incorporate all of the West Bank, and effectively the Gaza Strip, into a greater Israel."

For progressive critics of J Street, the veto, and continued settlement expansion, proves that alternative strategies need to be used to reach a real agreement—be it a one-state or two-state solution—rather than a mirage agreement that creates a Palestinian bantustan. "[J Street] put all their eggs into the Obama basket, and what we're getting is bupkes," said Rebecca Vilkomerson, executive director of the left-wing group Jewish Voice for Peace.

"It's a very clarifying moment for where we are in that it really shows us that just relying on governments, and specifically the U.S., as the vehicle for change in Israeli policy, is not going to do it," Vilkomerson said. "That's why we need to rely on civil society and tools like boycott, divestment and sanctions in order to get any real kind of change."

But J Street continues to stick to its strategy of advocating for American leadership on the issue, and has come out against the BDS movement.

"J Street is focused on the policy process and political process," said J Street president Ben-Ami during a press briefing at the conference.

J Street's Luria insisted that the next step should be "an American initiative that lays out American ideas." Boycott tactics, said Luria, are a "drop in the bucket compared to what an American-led peace could look like."

The group's anti-boycott stance, and its faith in American diplomatic leadership, reflects what blogger Richard Silverstein called a political tack "down the middle between right and left."

As human rights lawyer Sfard put it, American pressure—currently non-existent--is not what worries the Israeli leadership, but rather the growing non-violent resistance movement in Israel and Palestine. "Traditional politics failed, party politics failed…In the last five years there has been a growing movement of civil resistance to the occupation in Palestinian villages and rural areas. This is a growing trend, and I have to say, it scares the hell out of the Israeli administration much more than the American pressure."

That reality, though, hasn't penetrated J Street's leadership, though elements of its base get it. The group's continued push for an American-led proposal seems ever more distant, and all the more unlikely for that to materialize given that presidential elections are approaching. And the "Palestine Papers," as former director of the CIA's Counter-Terrorism Center Robert Grenier wrote in Al Jazeera, revealed that the "process for a two-state solution is essentially over."

The "Palestine Papers" and the UN veto show that the "Obama administration is absolutely not willing to use any of the sticks it has at its disposal and is only willing to use carrots with Israel," said Jewish Voice for Peace's Vilkomerson. "History has shown that these sorts of carrots do not get Israel to change its behavior."

Zoe Zenowich is a freelance journalist and the managing editor of the Excelsior, a Brooklyn College student newspaper. Follow her on Twitter. Alex Kane, a freelance journalist based in New York City, blogs on Israel/Palestine at alexbkane.wordpress.com. Follow him on Twitter.

DAILY KOS COMMUNITY SITE

Israel/Palestine/J Street News
By Friendlystranger
March 5, 2011

J Street held its' second annual conference in Washington DC on Feb. 26 thru Feb. 28. The following video is of journalist Mona Eltahawy speaking on a panel on Arab democracy movements.

[video url: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=PwAXfclJvlE]

A young Gazan confronts a member of the Knesset at the J Street conference.

[video url: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpnrNzWJbCo&feature=player_embedded]

Medea Benjamin of Code Pink gives her view of the J Street conference.

[video url: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44AjKqL1MIg&feature=player_embedded]

DAILY KOS COMMUNITY SITE

End The Occupation = Save Israel Now!
By volleyboy1
March 6, 2011
http://www.dailykos.com/story/2011/03/06/953137/-END-THE-OCCUPATIONSAVE-ISRAEL-NOW!

I write this diary as an open letter to everyone here, anyone who loves Israel, and hopefully people in Israel.

As an American Jew, I love two countries. My home is America, my family is now in it's 5th generation as an American family. My father served in the U.S. Army and had I not problems with my right eye I would have done R.O.T.C. in college. My wife is American, my kids are American and their kids I have no doubt will be American. I lived overseas for a year in Israel and studied at Hebrew U. in Jerusalem. Even durning the early 80's I proudly traveled with an American flag stitched on my backpack when others pretended to be Canadian. I fully expect to finish out my life as an American and am damn proud of it. I truly love my country and would gladly give my life for it.

As a Jew, I love Israel. I am proud of Israel, because I am a Jew, Israel is a country that means the world to me. I am re-learning the language, and re-immersing myself in Israeli culture. When I see the Magen David (Star of David) flying on a flag I am always thrilled. I donate to Israel, and should I be needed there, I would go and help. The Ha'tikvah ("The hope" in English), the National Anthem gives me a thrill of pride when I hear it. I cannot imagine a world without Israel and I would do anything to make sure that never happens.

This diary is not what you think it is.. It is not a call to destroy Israel, it is a call to save Israel. I simply cannot see any other way at this point than the way I am going to discuss here.

Where did the idea for this diary come from... Well I was reading the Israeli main dailies tonight Ynet and Haaretz and the the enormity of what Israel is facing as a nation hit me like a brick. Then I read an Op-Ed from Yair Lapid and that hit me like a brick because while I don't agree with everything he says (though I am not Israeli so it is not my place to judge), he is right that people have to decide who and what they are. My opinion like Lapid's is that it is time. For good or bad, for honesty's sake it's time. So here is my take.

First off, I want to re-quote something I used in my last diary. This was a challenge from Jeremy Ben-Ami, the head of J Street and then Haaretz columnist Bradley Burstonthat said: Israel can be Two of the following three things. Only Two, not all Three - what do you choose:

1. Israel can be a Democracy
2. Israel can be a Jewish State
3. Israel can be a country from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River.

That's it.. Bottom Line. What do you choose? Well, I choose Option 1 and Option 2. Which means what? End the Occupation. And as an American who proudly gives a small portion of his tax money (something on the order of $ 20.00 per year probably), and as a Jew - I get to say something. And this is just my opinion for all $ .02 that it is worth.

Ending the Occupation of most of the territory taken in the 1967 Six Day War is the right thing to do from so many different perspectives. But honestly it is the right thing to do from a human perspective. The people living in the occupied territories don't want Israel there. They don't like Israel, and no matter what Israel did or didn't do they will not like Israel. They really don't want Israel to exist at all, but, well.. pardon my language but that is tough shit and too bad for them. I say let the people in the territories figure out what they want, it's not up to me to decide for them. Ok so with that said, what about Jerusalem - I think the right thing to do is split it. The Israelis keep Judaism's holiest site The Western Wall, AND the Jewish Quarter that was part of the Jewish presence in Jerusalem for thousands of years until the Jordanians decided to get rid of the Jews there in 1948. As for the neighborhoods around Jerusalem, I say keep them BUT stop building more and stop encroaching on Arab areas like Silwan and Sheikh Jarrah.

Jerusalem is a holy city to the Arabs, both Christian and Muslim, we as Jews need to respect that even though when Jordan controlled the City they did not respect our people or history. But that really doesn't matter, Israel is not Jordan nor anyone else but Israel. Doing the right thing is important. How did we as Jews feel when our access or sovereignty over the Kotel was taken? They pretty much feel the same way.

What about the Settlers you ask particularly in places like Ariel and Hebron? Relocate them inside the new borders, whatever they get negotiated too. If they are not negotiated create defensible borders (yep unilateralism there) and relocate them. Israel has a State, give the Palestinians a chance as well. If the Settlers want to stay in their areas.. fine, let them. But if they can't respect the borders of Israel, then let them deal with the Palestinian government. Their choice. Personally, I think they will suddenly find that living in Israel has it's advantages and they will elect relocation.

Frankly, this article pissed me off.. The Settlers are pissed at PM Netanyahu because of lack of new building permits. Here is a guy that has accelerated their presence in the West Bank more than anyone else and they are pissed at him... Screw them. Netanyahu has bowed to their little right wing fantasies on almost every occasion and this is how they say thanks. The average Israeli has every reason to not like PM Netanyahu and half way through his administration he is floundering at a critical time in history. But the Right Wing,... the guy does everything to help them and this is what he gets? I don't say this out of pity for PM Netanyahu, I say this out of disgust with people who don't when enough is enough. The Yesha council makes it pretty clear that they don't give a crap about how many young men and women have to fight and die for them or what kind of problems they cause for Israel. All they care about is taking more and more.

And let's talk economics here because that is what prompted this whole thing. This project has cost Israel over $ 50 billion NIS (Almost $ 15 billion) and climbing. This article from 2007 discusses some of this in depth and the numbers have gotten worse. Israel's economy is suffering under Netanyahu's failed policies. Gas prices are through the roof, the infrastructure on Energy is

simply not there, the IDF has been lax on training (though that has improved since the Lebanon fiasco of 2006) and social programs (which Israel has been a beacon for including education) suffer greatly.

Three glaring problems stood out and prompted this article/letter. The first is that because of expenditures Israel's energy systems lack the needed development. Right now it has ONE source of Natural Gas. The other source (Egypt) has been closed. Today, that one source of Gas was interrupted. Israel's power plants did not have energy for four hours today. Think on that for a minute. No power. That source is fixed now but if Egypt does not come back (though the Egyptians promised it would), that source is out in 2012. Had it not been for the all the wasted money (and continued waste) perhaps other energy options could have been developed.
Then there is education. Israel used to be a leader in the field and it's Universities are top rate still. That's all fine and good but their pre-University education has dropped off the map. How do you run a society that NEEDS brain power because it lacks natural resources without a strong education program. Just think of the money that could have gone into that aspect of things.
Finally there is social welfare. Social workers live near poverty and are going on Strike. That will in effect suspend the entire welfare network for the State. Many here are not familiar with Israel but as a nation they take good care of their citizenry. Shut down that network and there are a lot of people that will suffer. BUT.. money to go build more Yeshiva's and Settlements keeps going unabated. The IDF gets sent in to protect and defend people who are not only poor neighbors to the local Arab villages but serve to agitate the local populace which does what... suck up more resources.

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH. I have family in Israel. They lived and fought, and helped found the State. Why the hell should all that be put to risk so some biblical promise can be fulfilled to the letter? Israel was founded, it is strong, it will be stronger without the constant drain on it. As a Jew, Israel is important for not only what it stands for but what it means to my children. No more can a Hitler come somewhere in the world and when the Jews flee, find the borders shut to them. They have a place. Risking it because 500 people want to live near the Cave of the Patriarchs is ridiculous and sad.

So I ask... negotiate from a position of strength, but negotiate. STOP wasting money on settlements you may have to abandon. Make the Palestinians a fair deal, and if they refuse, well.... then figure another way. BUT... end the Occupation and save your country. Please.

JEWCY

Jewcy Live At The 2011 J Street Conference
February 26, 2011
http://www.jewcy.com/news/2011-j-street-conference

Jewcy is live at the 2011 J Street conference in Washington D.C. Stay tuned to this page for live streaming of all the events, citizen journalism pieces and other updates beginning at 7 PM EST. Saturday through Monday.

Sunday, February 27th

9:15 AM In the "Working with Christian Communities towards a Two-State Solution" the Mike Huckabee jokes are flying.

9:25 AM People echoing the sentiment that the uprisings in the Arab world are not about Israel.

9:30 AM Person sitting next to me says "this is going to be a Tzipi Livni lovefest."

9:45 AM "It doesn't feel like peace is going to come from Israel." – Member of the crowd making statement, not asking a question.

10:oo AM We're updating testimonials from participants at the conference. First up are Tania and Steve.

10:15 AM Next session about to start; there are still danishes and 3 people made cracks about "They're pushing us in like livestock." Always awkward.

10:30 AM Discussion of the Israeli populations political breakdown. 45% consider themselves right-wing, 27% center, 17% left and 12% unidentified.

10:43 AM New Israel Fund's Naomi Chazan: 'Israel is in democratic recession."

10:50 AM New Israel Fund's CEO, Daniel J. Sokatch, gives us a testimonial as to why he's at J Street.

12:00 PM "Must ensure that the legitimate rights of the people are protected whilst their just cause is not hijacked by radical movements" – Ron Pundak.

12:15 PM We talked to Eric Alterman from *The Nation*.

12:25 PM Mona Eltahawy talking about revolutions through hashtags.

1:15 PM If There was a drinking game for every time we heard "3rd party," hashtag," and of course, "peace," the blood alcoholic level of this place could fuel half of Africa.

2:30 PM After the exodus to Chipotle, we're back in session with "Resolving the Middle East Conflict as a Core American National Security Interest."

2:45 PM "Every US president since Truman has thought solving the Middle East conflict is a US national security concern." – Brian Katulis, Senior Fellow, Center for American Progress

4:30 PM "Netanyahu is not in control of his government." -Yoel Hasson, Member of Knesset (Kadima). Says the (Israeli) government will become unstable in 2012.

Monday, February 28th

9:10 AM Chief Presidential adviser on the Middle East, Dennis Ross, emphasizes US support of Egypt.

9:20 AM Ross emphasizing how the US has not forgotten about Middle Eastern partners and allies in the last few weeks. Leads into talking about Israel.

9:25 AM "There has never been a time when US support for Israeli security has been stronger than it is now." – Ross

10:00 AM "You can't be a friend of Arab freedom if you're on the wrong side of Palestinian freedom." – Daniel Levy, New America Foundation

10:10 AM "In Tahrir Square I never heard Israel mentioned. This is about gaining dignity and rights." – Roger Cohen from The New York Times

3:00 PM Going into "Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions in 2011: Who's Afraid of the BDS?" This is one of the most talked about controversial panels of the entire conference.

3:45 PM Stepped out of BDS panel for a moment. 3 people who want to get in started to scream at me. They backed off when I told them I was grabbing my asthma inhaler.

2011 J Street Conference
March 4, 2011
http://www.jewlicious.com/2011/03/2011-j-street-conference/

Aw man! This year the Jewlicious Festival and the JStreet National conference were at almost the same time! Had the scheduling been different I might have braved the snow in DC and the lack of Kosher food at the JStreet conference in order to attend. Luckily, there are oodles of videos online about the event – some even featuring just your every day conference attendees – this is important because as everyone knows, at conferences, it's all about the shmooze. In any case, the video below features random interviews with random J Street conference attendees. They have some interesting things to say:

[video url: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ll0_DVR8pXM&feature=player_embedded]

Yeah.

UPDATE: Oh crap. Working the Jewlicious Festival really kicked the crap out of me and it seems I missed a whole big kerfuffle regarding this video! OK so here it is. William Daroff tweeted a link to the video above. If you haven't seen it yet, it features some "random attendees at J Street's second national conference making loony left-wing statements about Israel and Hamas." The Washington Jewish Week, which wouldn't post the video, quoted one person on the video as follows:

One participant, for instance, is asked by the anonymous videographer if she believes Hamas is terrorist organization. Her smiley response: "Not anymore than the IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] is."

In any case, you can read the twitter dust up between William Daroff and Repair the World's Director of Digital Strategy, Dan Sieradski (who was not tweeting as a representative of RTW) by reading the The Washington Jewish Week post on the issue.

Now, you know me, I have been critical of J Street on more than one occasion. While I think that some members of J Street definitely fall within the "Loony Left" category, I can't say that they all do or that the people in this video are representative of the J Street organization. I mean, look at this video:

[video url: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huXez_aA-GI&feature=player_embedded]

Aren't those kids cute representin' with their Hashomer Hatzair shirts? What about Shawn Landres who attended the J Street National Conference despite his declaration that he doesn't always agree with them? Here's the link to that. Not posting the video because Shawn isn't wearing a cute tie. The point is that in this case I am kind of sympathetic to J Street. I know that

if someone went through the Jewlicious Festival and cherry picked interviews, they could paint the Festival any way they wanted to – from a right wing, pro settler Orthodox celebration, to a drunken frat boy orgy. Luckily, no one has done that (yet) and if they did I would find them and ki… uhm, hug them and shower them with love because unconditional love is how we hasten the arrival of the Mashiach! Yeah.

One of the people caught in the video sting, I guess Harpo Jaegger is his name, tries to explain his and the others' comments on his blog. He seems kind of young and certainly earnest but I don't know that he did such a good job defending J Street from the "smear" represented by the video. Read his post, tell me what you think. Dan Sierdaski for his part wrote a comment in the aforementioned Washington Jewish Week article where he stated "As we endeavor to figure out "how big the 'pro-Israel tent' should be," we should be mindful not to take people's words and ideas out of context in order to score cheap political points." I agree. That's why I think that some of Max Blumenthal's videos are unfair – but where was the outrage from the progressives when Blumenthal does what he does? Don't ask me – I don't know. Daroff also wrote a comment, gotta read that too.

My final take on this is that this is what happens when extremes collide. Anyone reasonable would know that the people in the video are not representative of J Street as a whole. They made the cut specifically because of the extremity of their words. The right does it to the left and the left does it to the right. Those who love partisan bickering, will either love or loathe this sort of thing – those of us who actually care about peace and justice will just ignore this nonsense.

Why I (still) support J Street
By renaissanceboy
February 24, 2011
http://jewschool.com/2011/02/24/25586/why-i-still-support-j-street/

This weekend, several of us from Jewschool will join over 2,000 other people in DC for the 2011 J Street conference. The reasons for my continued involvement with and support for J Street are complex. On the one hand, I harbor deep moral reservations concerning the idea of religious or ethnic states. Yet I find the idea of a binational state completely unworkable, in that I don't think it would materially improve Palestinians' lives (I tend to think it would worsen them).

So what's a Jew to do? I realized early on in my activism that J Street was a unique organization. Unique not only in its policy positions, but in its belief of how those positions should be articulated, advanced, and discussed. J Street's dual function – advancing a liberal view of Israel that treats Palestinians as partners in nation-building rather than obstacles to Jewish self-determination while simultaneously establishing a robust space where Israel-Palestine activism can stem from real, respectful discussion – is often criticized as a weakness, but I view it as a strength. Having spent the last few years getting more and more deeply involved with J Street, and, as a consequence, surrounding myself more and more with like-minded Jews, it's easy for me to forget the guttural fear and hatred that J Street still inspires in some of its foes. That fear, itself a symptom of close-mindedness, is what convinces me that J Street is doing something right. It's what keeps me passionate about my activism. And it's what keeps me excited about the vast amount of work that still remains to be done.

Working with J Street has caused me to question how the traditional pro-Israel narrative is presented, and to reflect on how this narrative permeates so many aspects of Jewish cultural and religious life. This weekend, I'm looking forward to fresh inspiration from people who've dedicated their careers and lives to democratizing that narrative and opening it to criticism, revision, and ownership by those of us who for too long were defined out of its constituency.

If you'll be at the conference, let us know! We'd love to see you there.

Round up: J Street conference – first full day
By renaissanceboy
February 28, 2011
http://jewschool.com/2011/02/28/25604/round-up-j-street-conference-%E2%80%93%C2%A0first-full-day/

I was fortunate enough to get interviews (on video!) with Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf of the Cordoba Initiative and Mona Eltahawy, both incredible thinkers and speakers. The internet at my hostel (and at the conference) is incredibly slow, so I'll post them once I'm back at home.

More generally, though, the conference this year has a different feel than the last. The moments of complete inspiration are a bit fewer, but there's much more of a sense of cohesiveness between sessions. J Street has really matured as an organization, and I think a lot of the credit for this goes to the work of the locals, who provide a reference to the real conditions that activists face in attempting to advance the Israel-Palestine discussion on the ground. This isn't to enforce the view of all Washington politicians as part of a bubble, totally disconnected from the outside world, just to say that a connection to those who are actually the constituents is an invaluable asset for an organization that values its supporters' views.

Now more than ever, I feel that J Street values mine.

You can find me (overwhelmed) on J Street
By Kung Fu Jew
March 1, 2011
http://jewschool.com/2011/03/01/25614/you-can-find-me-overwhelmed-on-j-street/

I find myself overwhelmed. My heart has been bursting with pride for two days. Tomorrow I lead two delegations to legislators on Capital Hill, bouyed by the show of grassroots power I just witnessed. Check that, no, that I have helped build. This weekend, I remember why I do what I do. And I celebrated with the fruition of our planting.

At opening ceremonies on Saturday night, J Street flexed 16 months of growth since their last conference for show. That's what political conferences are for, after all. And what a showing – purportedly among the top five largest gatherings of Jews in America. (AIPAC's annual showing is 7.5K, the General Assembly is roughly 5K, URJ's Biennial is too, and J Street is over 2K.) Waves of cheers erupted as each of 40 local chapters took shout outs. Then a parade of beaming students marched across stage calling out each of the 138 campuses represented. Waves of cheers. The who's who of progressive global Jewish life was there — including Canada and the UK. The 30 sponsoring groups included Israel's leading human rights leaders, like Naomi Chazan and Hagai El-Ad. Rabbis, grassroots leaders, campus heads all gathered under one roof. Rabbi David Saperstein enthusiastically delivered the opening address, a preacher in his element. Saperstein's fast-paced and booming voice evoked a Judaism of aspirations: freedom, social justice, hope, and spirit. Peace is God's work, we remembered. Peace wasn't a wussy buzzword. Peace was power. Compared to the sullen crankery of Rabbi Eric Yoffie last time, Saperstein was inspirational.

Like his boss before him, he delivered criticism as well, warning attendees:

"You *matter* politically, you *matter* media-wise. And all of your members can feel they are part of something that has influence and impact. You will on the one hand lose your energy if you lose your dovish activists. But you lose your political and media clout if you lose your mainstream wing. In assessing strategies and tactics, you need consider not only the theoretical positions you take, but the tactical impact of those you choose.

…But if you alienate the mainstream religious and political core of US support, you risk losing everything. Are there going to moments in the history of Israel-US relations with a significance of momentous decision that will really make a difference require you to push the envelope? Perhaps even alienate some of your mainstream religious and political constituents? Yes. But they must be few and far between, of the utmost importance where you really have a chance to change the outcome by weighing in, and where you work diligently with your supporters on the Hill to bring them around to this decision.

This would be only one of the first of many moments when conference speakers would issue challenges to J Street, which would include lefty Middle East commentator Mona Eltahaway and Kadima members of Knesset. Here J Street role modeled for a narrow-minded and intellectually stifled mainstream how open conversation strengthens, not weakens. Over the weekend, panels would feature speakers greatly at odds with J Street's (and the mainstream's) positions, yet who were greeted respectfully. Even Noah Pollak, director of the Emergency Committee for Israel and a lead hater of J Street's activities, was welcomed and treated without disrespect. If only the AIPAC annual event and the General Assembly could even flirt with such open-mindedness.

After J Street founder and director Jeremy Ben-Ami warmly thanked Saperstein, and turned to the three voices being honored: Peter Beinart, Sara Benninga and Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish. An American, an Israeli, a Palestinian. Each spoke for the unique modern day experience of Israel — not the dreamy and perfect Israel conjured by mainstream white washers. J Street U student leader Mori Rothman said by way of Beinart's introduction, "I love Israel. But I did not love the war on Gaza. I love Israel, but I do not love the way it treats its minorities. I love Israel, but I do not love the occupation of Palestinian land."

Beinart himself began his speech by dating the foundings of new progressive Israel organizations paced with the population increases within "non-democratic Israel," his clever reframing of the settlements. While he paid due to J Street's partners and predecessors he warned:

And so we come together knowing we are not the first group of American Jews to gather in defense of the principles in Israel's Declaration of Independence. But make no mistake: we are the last. There will be no next J Street. If we fail, our children will meet in halls like these not to defend democracy in the Jewish state, but to mourn democracy in the Jewish state.

Benninga represented the many leaders of the Sheikh Jarrah protestors, a new generation of young Israeli activists who have breathed revived energy into the Israeli left. While Beinart's words were about Jewish sovereignty and Holocaust legacy to preserve Jewry, Sara spoke to human rights, called out Jewish privilege, denounced racism in Israeli society, and spoke truth to power. It was a reflection of a new paradigm on the left — to hell with demographics, this is about simple equality.

Lastly, Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish reminded us of tragedy, relating the loss of his three daughters to a tank shell in Gaza. Whereas tears of hope and pride wet my eyes throughout the night, Abuelaish reminded me why I'm a peace activist in the first place: to stop death on both sides. Not a dry eye was present in the room. I remembered every Israeli and Palestinian I'd ever met who'd lost someone they loved. That is why I fight for peace, make it my daily work, even rely on its meager rations to pay bills. Abuelaish lost his three daughters — yet has not lost sight of the goal, an end.

It's time and nothing is impossible. I don't believe in impossible things. It's not in my vocabulary. The only impossible thing I [don't] believe in is to bring my daughters back [sic]. Whatever criticisms one may have of J Street as an organization, you cannot minimize the sheer demand for it. Barely two years ago, I was the NYC head and a national board member of Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, holding and planning an annual lobby day just like this. We had at most 300

people, a rump oft-dismissed by mainstream types. Who would have thought that now there would be so many of us? The number of attendees and quality of speakers confirm the words of Hadar Susskind, "J Street's success is half Jeremy Ben-Ami, half the vacuum it filled." The establishment failed to include us; now we come 'a calling. So much for those predictions of J Street's demise. The greatest refutation of the attacks on J Street is recent months is on the beaming faces of the people here: we are the future of the Jewish community, here to get even bigger.

More conference coverage to come.

Interviews with Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf and Mona Eltahawy
By renaissanceboy
March 3, 2011
http://jewschool.com/2011/03/03/25651/interviews-with-imam-feisal-abdul-rauf-and-mona-eltahawy/

Update: videos are now embedded in the post. Enjoy!

As I mentioned in my brief first-day J Street conference round up post, I secured interviews with Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf of the Cordoba Initiative (best known for the Ground Zero Mosque, which is neither at Ground Zero nor a mosque), and Mona Eltahawy, the Egyptian journalist and activist who rocked the socks off the J Street conference. Those videos are now online; the YouTube playlist is here. There are three videos – Mona Eltahawy on social media in the Jasmine Revolution and its potential in the future of the Arab and Muslim world, my question for Imam Rauf on the religious justification for his work, and footage of a few other press-folk asking him questions. Check them out!

Mona did a superb job of addressing the straw man argument made by most of the prominent critics of the social-media-as-organizing-tool theory (Malcolm Gladwell, Evgeny Morozov, etc.). That is, she made a strong case for how Twitter and Facebook were essential in helping garner support for a mass meeting and demonstration of a kind that was quite rare under Mubarak. Notably, she doesn't claim that it was Twitter or Facebook that toppled the regime. No, that distinction belongs to the brave Egyptians who risked their lives to claim their basic human rights of freedom of speech and assembly. But if you look closely, most of us arguing for social media's importance in democratic movements aren't saying that it's the Internet itself that overthrows regimes, just that it's a tool for those who desire to do so. The key to any organized resistance movement, especially one that aspires to nonviolence, is organization. Today, the Internet is often one of the last places where free exchange of ideas can take place. Its fast pace and adaptability mean that dedicated users can often stay one step ahead of those trying to shut down the flow of information. This is what makes it important and in some ways game-changing.

Imam Rauf, who's been one of my personal heroes for a long time, spoke beautifully about the religious underpinnings of his peace work. I hadn't planned to ask him about this – the question came about as a result of a topic of discussion on the panel on Jewish-Muslim community relations on which he'd just spoken. One Jewish community leader explained a program called "Iftar in the Sukkah," in which local Muslims and Jews gathered at an Orthodox shul to share the evening break-fast meal during Ramadan, which for the past few years has overlapped with Sukkot. The image of Muslims and Jews taking part in this ritual together was, for me, amazing, and reminded me of the phrase "ufros aleinu sukkat shlomecha" – "spread over us your sukkah of peace." This is pretty much one of my favorite liturgical lines ever, and I felt that I just had to

ask Imam Rauf about it. So I mentioned that connection, and asked him what scriptural or Islamic theological justification he found for his work. His answer, that it's rooted in the very word "Islam," coming from "Salaam," was completely in line with his messages of peace and mutual understanding.

I continue to be inspired by the work that both of these courageous activists do every day. Mona Eltahawy speaks truth to power, and Imam Rauf (and the Park 51 project overall) has handled himself with incredible grace in the face of one of the worst smear campaigns I've ever seen, and more generally in a climate of increasing American Islamophobia. May they both continue their work and dedication, and may their efforts be rewarded.

And let us say, Amen.

J Street conference: Lobbying for peace
By Simcha Shtull
March 15, 2011
http://jew-ish.com/index.php?/stories/item/3903

Simcha Shtull reports on the J Street conference in DC, where activists from all walks of life appealed to the Jewish people's "ethical message for the world."

Last week I joined more than 2,400 supporters of Israel — 20 of them from Washington State — at the second J Street Conference in Washington, D.C. The forum in which I found myself was comprised of activists, students, political analysts, members of Knesset, rabbis, and concerned American Jews.

Unlike what the expected detractors have suggested to the media, all of these attendees support a secure and democratic Jewish homeland that reflects the best of our values and traditions. With a broad range of Jewish, Israeli, American and Palestinian speakers, the conference provided an intellectual and emotional incubator for the community of people who support both Israel and Palestinian national realization.

Though the JTA wire service's article on March 1 inaccurately described the conference as weak in its support for Israeli security, 700 of its attendees went to Capitol Hill after the conference ended to ask our Congressional representatives to support our vision for peace in the Middle East. As part of our lobbying effort, we requested support for the administration's efforts to prevent reductions in foreign aid that advance U.S. interests in the Middle East, and we asked members of Congress to support President Obama's budget request providing $3.075 billion in assistance to Israel as agreed upon in the 2007 Memorandum of Understanding between Israel and the United States.

Alongside that appeal was a request for strong and consistent funding to strengthen institution- and state-building efforts in the West Bank. A viable Palestinian Authority able to grow its economy, meet the basic needs of its citizens, and reduce the risk of terror aimed at Israel is essential to achieving a negotiated, peaceful solution with Israel.

A consistent theme in many of the conference discussions concerned the corrosive, trickle-down effect of the conflict and continued occupation of the West Bank on democratic institutions in Israel. We have seen in recent years an erosion of the legitimacy of dissent, a growing intolerance of religious and ethnic minorities, and a rising tendency to label those Israelis (and Jews across the globe) who defend human rights as unpatriotic and even treasonous.

Conference speakers expressed concern for this current that seeks to stifle dissent and impose an exclusive nationalism in Israeli society. They spoke, too, of the many courageous individuals and organizations working to defend the values of democracy — in civil society, in the courts, in Knesset, in the media, and in the arena of public opinion.

In an atmosphere of open discussion and debate, journalists, analysts, directors of NGOs, activists and policy makers deliberated whether the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is, in fact, a "core national security interest" for the United States; whether Israel is a Jewish social justice issue; what role the United States should play in creating environmental cooperation, economic development and people-to-people projects in the Middle East; how the sensitive subject of an "indivisible" Jerusalem might be negotiated; what the broader implications of democracy movements in the Arab world may mean for America, Israel and the region; and much, much more.

I am an American and an Israeli. I lived in Israel for 20 years and raised my family there; three of my four children still live in Tel Aviv. The J Street experience reassured me that there is a community that represents and promotes the Jewish values on which I was raised and which inspired my aliyah almost three decades go. Journalist Peter Beinart eloquently expressed this sentiment in his remarks on the first evening of the conference:

"Our parents and grandparents struggled to ensure that the Jewish people would survive, to ensure that we would not be forever at the mercy of the gentile world. And in that awesome struggle, to their everlasting credit, despite the millions of dead, they triumphed. Today, because of them, we not only have a Jewish state, we have power, both in Israel and the United States that they could only have dreamed of. But with that power comes another struggle, every bit as momentous: Not a struggle for Jewish survival, but a struggle for Jewish honor. A struggle to show that we can wield power and still keep faith with the teachings of the Prophets, a struggle to show that, despite everything, the Jewish people still has an ethical message for the world."

Gather the Jews.com

What is J-Street?
By Stephen Richer
March 16, 2011
http://www.gatherthejews.com/2011/03/what-is-j-street/

After posting these remarks from the recent J-Street conference (J Street President Ben-Ami and Dennis Ross) and this critical video, several GTJ readers felt that J-Street had been depicted unfairly. GTJ asked these viewers to submit a video that they felt better portrayed J-Street. They sent this video today, and true to our word, we are posting it as part of a continued discussion.

GTJ neither refutes nor endorses this perspective.

Click this link to view the video:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=KMDueD1K5CU

Some Thoughts from the J Street Conference
By Jeremiah Haber
March 2, 2011
http://www.jeremiahhaber.com/2011/03/some-thoughts-from-j-street-conference.html?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter

I didn't attend the plenary sessions at the J Street conference in DC; the last people I wanted to hear from were Kadima MKs and Dennis Ross (though I did hear some of the panel discussion afterwards. I never knew that Bernard Avishai was a *kohen*.) If Jeremy Ben Ami wants to tell the Israel press that J Street is Kadima, that's his business. As for the people in the plenary sessions I would be interested in hearing, I can get that on their website.

No, I came to talk with the old and the young, and not with the middle generation, my generation, on which I have virtually given up hope. I went to a session on the New Left in Israel and was treated to a ½ generational debate between Hagit Ofran of Peace Now's Settlement Watch, and Oded Naaman and Asaf Sharon of Breaking the Silence and the Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity Movement. Hagit supported translating the activists message into a program that more mainstream Israelis could buy into; Oded and Asaf were more interested in education over the long-haul, through doing what their organizations are doing – and for direct action on the ground.

The session on the campus climate for Israel was a big surprise to me. I thought that the International Hillel representative, Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt, would be there to defend the guidelines that International Hillel drew up to exclude Jewish Voice for Peace, and other organizations to the left of J Street. Instead, she clearly displayed her personal discomfort with the guidelines, as did the other panelists on the dais, with the exception of Rabbi Lisa Goldstein, herself a Hillel Director. She explained that Hillel has to exclude groups whose presence are campus are polarizing, like Jewish groups that are racist or those that support BDS. It was not that she wished to equate racism with adopting BDS as a tactic for furthering justice; she simply felt that Hillel should be a space where Jews can feel comfortable without this polarization. Hillel is not just about Israel, she said; it is about shabbat dinners; social action, etc. Of course, one could counter that if the Hillel community doesn't want polarization, it should simply exclude Israel from its space. If Israel is polarizing the Jewish community on campus, let the Zionist activity go on elsewhere in the campus, and let Hillel focus on matters related to Judaism, learning, social action, etc.

Not one of the questioners in the q & a accepted Rabbi Goldstein's position. After all, this was J Street, and J Street – especially J Street U -- has not endorsed Hillel's "McCarthyite guidelines," to quote one of the questioners. My position was summed up best by Aliyah Donsky, a first year Princeton student who had opposed the Princeton Hillel Director's decision to interfere in the Sabra Humus referendum held earlier this year (The director urged Jewish students to vote down a referendum calling for an alternative to Sabra Humus). Aliyah thought that Hillel was a space

where all Jews should be welcome – without having to leave their political opinions and activities at the door.

I missed the BDS panel with Rebecca Vilkomerson, director of JVP, but I urge you to read her statement at Max Blumenthal's blog here.

And one more thing: I had a nice chat with Leonard – Leibel - Fein, that grand old liberal Jew, whose life reads like a history of the "Jews for a just peace" movement. Those of us who are over 50 and still have our memories, would do well to remind the J Street U generation that J Street was not created *ex nihilo*, and that progressive Jews – and progressive Jewish critics of Israel like Leibel -- have a long and distinguished history. The young people who form "Beinart's army" (yes, J Street U sold a t-shirt with that slogan!) – can still learn a lot from their elders – and from their elders' mistakes, of course.

Note to JBA: It would be a good idea to have a session next year honoring some of those progressive Jewish "lions in winter."

Thoughts From the Desert

J Street--A Breath of Fresh Air
By Larry Gellman
February 28, 2011
http://larrygellman.blogspot.com/2011/02/j-street-breath-of-fresh-air.html

I am in my third day of the J Street annual conference here in Washington. What I have seen in person on the ground here is an energized and committed group of people--almost all Jews--who care deeply about Israel and the Jewish people and who are very concerned that the policies of the current Israeli government and religious leadership are doing a great deal of harm. I have always been taught and believe that acting and speaking out on those kinds of concerns are the highest form of patriotism and Jewish responsibility.

The sessions have featured amazing speakers, including former AIPAC execs Tom Dine and Doug Bloomfield, Dennis Ross, Rabbi David Saperstein, Imam Faisal Rauf of the Cordoba Initiative, Peter Beinart, Steven Cohen, Daniel Levy, many members of Congress, and five members of the Knesset representing different parties who are here to both express their views and to show their support for J Street and what it represents.

Although J Street is barely two years old, the conference has attracted more than 2,000 attendees including 500 students. More than 11,000 people have attended J Street events during the last year and the are now 38 local chapters in 26 states and J Street U chapters on 182 campuses.

The conference has featured a number of plenaries and dozens of breakout sessions. I haven't heard a single comment from anyone who doesn't care deeply about Israel's future as a Jewish state. As with all healthy organizations, I have heard a lot of introspection and self-criticism.

In Rabbi Saperstein's keynote address, he broadly praised J Street for filling a huge void that existed in the pro-Israel pro-peace conversation but went on to criticize J Street for it's politically questionable decision to urge the U..S. to refrain from vetoing the resolution condemning Israel's settlement policy. It is refreshing to be part a pro-Israel group at a conference where people are encouraged to express their personal opinions, criticisms, and concerns out loud.

I am saddened that so many of my Jewish friends have resorted to the Fox News-like tactics of using lies, partial truths, and distortions in an effort to demonize J Street and smear its donors and professionals. Virtually every viral email I have received was written and/or forwarded by people who are not here at the conference nor have they ever had any first-hand contact with anyone from J Street

What we have now in the Jewish and pro-Israel movement is a healthy alternative. For Jews who believe our top priority--not the only priority but our top priority--is to protect and defend the State of Israel, then AIPAC (I support AIPAC financially and have served on it's local board) provides a great way to leverage that feeling.

For those who believe our top priority is to live out their Jewish values and who are focused on the commandments to work for peace, to improve the world, and to love the stranger then J Street provides a vehicle to leverage that approach. As a serious Jew who cares deeply about both Israel and Jewish values, I am thrilled that both organizations are part of our political and Jewish landscape.

I attended a J Street leadership meeting here a few months ago where Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren congratulated J Street for having "made it" and expressed his desire to work closely with J Street in the future.

I have not heard AIPAC negatively mentioned once here at the conference and yet I read articles and receive frequent emails from my AIPAC friends trying to delegitimize and destroy J Street. It is as though they believe if they say enough bad things, J Street will just go away. They remind me of the Wizard of Oz frantically scurrying around telling Dorothy and her friends to "pay no attention to the man behind the curtain."

As the Wizard found out, that is not an approach that works well or for long.

On the First Day Of J Street…
By Mitchell Plitnick
February 26, 2011
http://mitchellplitnick.com/2011/02/26/on-the-first-day-of-j-street%E2%80%A6/

J Street's second national conference kicked off tonight with a very large crowd of over 2,000. Of significant note was the presence of almost 500 students from the relatively new J Street U. I came in concerned about the atmosphere at this conference. In 2009, at the first J Street national conference, there was a good deal of hope. Israel was facing great international pressure due to the onslaught on Gaza earlier in the year; President Obama had made it clear that he opposed Israeli settlements in a more substantive way than his predecessors; and that there was a real sense of urgency toward a two-state solution.

Now, the two-state solution seems to have been killed by Israel, Obama has shown that he will not get into fights about his Mideast policies and there is a general feeling of hopelessness about any diplomatic process. So what would this mean for J Street in 2011?

It seems like someone at J Street considered just that question. The decision to have Peter Beinart speak at their opening plenary was a no-brainer. But bringing Sarah Benninga and Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish was unexpected and turned out to be a very powerful way to begin the conference.

After Rabbi David Saperstein of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism gave a passionate opening talk that basically supported J Street but placed himself on its right flank, Beinart gave a more or less standard overview of the liberal view of the situation. He did, though, touch on many important points—especially noteworthy was his statement of support for Jewish women who wish to carry Torah scrolls at the Western Wall.

But to that point, it felt like a standard reading of the pro-Israel liberal community, and it felt very much like it was leading toward the dead-end that has been created by the sharp rightward shift of Israel, both in terms of peace and in terms of its own democratic institutions.
Then Sarah Benninga spoke, and a fire was lit in the room.

Benninga, a young leader of the protests that have been taking place in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah gave an immensely powerful talk which called of unity between Arabs and Jews, and was clearly coming from a place of belief in universal rights for all. Her opening remarks about a "curtain of ignorance" for Israeli Jews which was opened for her when she just went over to East Jerusalem to see for herself, gave us insight into her journey, but her passion and determination for justice was presented in raw and energetic form. In her talk, politics were subordinated to ethics.

Benninga got a laugh from the audience of mostly Americans when she asked what we would do if our government treated the Constitution as mere empty words. She then said she chooses to

fight a similar dynamic in Israel, which ignores the noble words of its Declaration of Independence. Given how much harder that is to do in Israel, it was particularly inspirational.

Then Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish spoke. This man, whose three daughters were killed when Israeli tanks shelled his home in Gaza without justification of any kind, still speaks of co-existence. Dr. Abuelaish worked in Israel for many years, and was well-known among Israelis and Palestinians. Israel eventually apologized to him, which certainly makes him an exceptional Palestinian.

I cannot imagine how one does not hate those who did such a terrible thing, but Dr. Abuelaish has found a way. He speaks of a burning desire for justice, but in his noble view, justice is not retribution. Justice, instead, is a future where Israelis and Palestinians no longer live in fear, separated from each other both physically and psychologically.

I was particularly taken with what might have been an unintentional jab at the American nonsense that "freedom isn't free" when Dr. Abuelaish stated that freedom was the right of every person and there must never be a price for it.

The passion with which Ms. Benninga and Dr. Abuelaish spoke sent waves of energy through the room. Both of them made it clear that J Street was a group they had high hopes for and expectations of. They yearn for the sort of real, concrete support for justice and peace which the US is capable of bringing, even if it seems like our own domestic politics will forever make it impossible.

Most of all, Benninga and Abuelaish stayed away from the larger politics, the two-state questions, and other ideas which divide the left. They both spoke of settlements, but the strong sense I got from both of them was that their fight is not for this or that solution, but for justice, for peace and for equal rights for all the people in Israel and the Occupied Territories.

At J Street, that will be translated into work for a two-state solution, but it also jibed well with J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami's frequently repeated theme of casting a big tent, opening up a conversation in the Jewish community and finding ways to channel energies of people into political momentum for a solution, rather than getting stuck on places where there are sharp differences.

Ben-Ami was not suggesting those differences be ignored. On the contrary, he was saying they should be discussed and argued. But he seemed to me to be implying that they should not prevent cooperation on matters that can be cooperated on. He didn't say that, but it was the sense I got from many of his words.

If so, J Street has made some crucial advances. I suppose the test of those ideals will come in the next two days, when some of those differences will be aired, and then see where the organization goes from here.

Tomorrow is a full day with two plenary sessions and two sets of smaller discussion groups, and that is where the real meat of the conference will begun to be sliced up. This was a much better start than I expected, though.

See? We Can Talk About BDS
By Mitchell Plitnick
March 3, 2011
http://mitchellplitnick.com/2011/03/02/see-we-can-talk-about-bds/

I asked myself, should I blog first about the J Street conference as a whole, or about the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) panel in particular, since I plan to write both.

I decided to start with the BDS panel, because it really was a remarkable event. J Street got an enormous amount of flak for agreeing to host a discussion about BDS in a liberal Jewish venue. Many on the right used it to "prove" that J Street was really anti-Israel, though that argument seemed to have convinced no one outside of their own amen chorus.

While the panel of four featured only one explicitly pro-BDS person, another opposed the global BDS movement but supported certain kinds of economic action against the occupation and a third expressed sympathy to some of the motivations behind BDS, objecting more to the atmosphere the debate creates and the bellicosity of some of its proponents.

Rebecca Vilkomerson of Jewish Voice for Peace acquitted herself very well in being the lone voice supporting BDS on the panel. It was a tough task, but, having known Rebecca for many years, I had no doubt that she was up to it, and she didn't disappoint.

Still, her task was not as hard as it might have been, and perhaps as it might have seemed to her and to her organization coming in. Nothing, of course, was settled in that room, and I imagine few people left with a different opinion than they came in with, albeit perhaps with a lot more to think about with regard to BDS.

But the panel was still a triumph simply because it was at a major national Jewish pro-Israel event and the conversation was civilized, respectful, and for the most part very informative. People *listened.* Sure, there were occasional murmurs, but everyone was allowed to speak, and the questions that were asked by both sides were genuine and respectful. That in itself is a triumph on this subject.

The panel, in fact was almost completed without disruption. In literally the last minute of the the talk, one unruly audience member began to shout at Vilkomerson (not, in fact, about BDS, but about JVP's agnosticism on a one- or two-state solution). But that one scar on the perfection of the audience's behavior, despite strong feelings only highlighted the success of the conversation in that room.

Ken Bob of Ameinu was by far the most reactionary of the group, opening his comments with a blanket statement that the global BDS movement's goal is "one state between Mediterranean and Jordan." He's wrong about that, though he is accurately reflecting a widespread perception of the

global BDS movement. The other two speakers, author and economist Bernard Avishai and student leader Simone Zimmerman gave considerably more nuanced presentations.

Bob's comments, though, were very important, because his view was the most representative of genuine peace advocates (which Ken most certainly is) who are hostile to the BDS movement. At this stage, I should probably reiterate that I don't support the global BDS movement, though I also oppose its demonization, and do support economic action aimed at ending the occupation. This was probably the biggest reason that I left my friends at JVP three years ago, despite the very good work they do. You can see my reasons at the above link.

But I also know that there is good reason to support strong economic action against the occupation, especially here in the United States, where our ostensibly superpower government has been completely impotent in stopping settlement expansion and numerous Israeli crimes against Palestinians.

The strong reactions to BDS make sense, but should be examined critically. They make sense because BDS does cast Israel in a harsh light, and is based, certainly for many if not most BDS activists, on the comparison with South Africa. That is going to upset a lot of people.

And this was somewhat evident when Bob made the point that BDS puts the focus on targeting Israel rather than on ending the occupation. The point is a little odd, but it also betrays a certain framework that should be examined critically as well.

The occupation is about to complete its 44th year. Even if one grants (and I do not) that Israel fought a defensive war in 1967 and ended up with the land without intent, it cannot be argued that Israel has, in those 44 years, made a serious effort to end that occupation. The massive expansion of settlements in occupied territory, which are now home to around 500,000 settlers in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, puts the lie to any claim of Israeli determination to end the occupation. It's even more striking when you consider that this represents a more than an 80% population increase since 1993, the year the Oslo Accords were culminated.

That circumstance, the frustration at Israel's refusal to slow down its settlement enterprise, the decline of Palestinian standards of living since the inception of the Oslo era (largely due to the evaporation of job opportunities for Palestinians in Israel and the massive proliferation of checkpoints which disrupt routine life and commerce for Palestinians), the disparity of power between Israeli and the Palestinians and the dishonest role the United States has played in the peace process created the impetus for the BDS movement.

Increased awareness of the human rights violations inherent in the occupation, the tightening of the occupation with the separation barrier and the tiny scope of relief Israel has given West Bankers in the wake of universally praised efforts by the PA to crack down on Hamas and enforce security for Israelis gave the movement added momentum. And the Israeli siege on Gaza, Operation Cast Lead and the flotilla incident last year made BDS expand like a balloon hooked up to a compressed air tank.

These worsening conditions are happening in years where Israelis are more secure than they've ever been. Can we really expect that Israel won't be attacked under such circumstances? It is Israel's own policies that are feeding this movement, and it will continue to grow until Israel stops feeding it. For those of us who do not wish to see Israel so targeted, it's crucial that we lay the blame where it belongs: at the door of Israeli policy.

To be sure, many in the global BDS movement could rightly be called "anti-Israel." But many others are simply responding to some serious escalations in human rights issues, particularly in Gaza, and the lack of hope for substantive change in the West Bank. Demonizing those activists instead of recognizing that Israel's own actions are causing this is only going to make matters worse. We can deal with these issues more directly, as the J Street panel proved. And so we should.

Reining In Rampant Nationalism: The Way Toward a Realistic Mideast Peace
By Mitchell Plitnick
March 16, 2011
http://mitchellplitnick.com/2011/03/16/reining-in-rampant-nationalism-the-way-toward-a-realistic-mideast-peace/

On the "About" page of The Third Way, I made the following statement: ""My approach begins with the idea that Zionism was an entirely justified national movement, and that Palestinians also are deserving of the same human, civil and national rights as anyone else. Reconciling these two things is not simple, as they clash in essential and inherent ways. But finding that reconciliation is the only way, in my view, to get us out of the murderous quagmire that has existed in the region for more than a century."

Meanwhile, in a recent post on the Meretz USA blog, Sarah Strnad, Meretz USA's Assistant Director, and a woman I recently got to meet and was very impressed with,

If this is where Zionism is going, it's not a Zionism most Israelis or Diaspora Jews will relate to struggled with how to balance a Zionist identity and the universal values of human rights and democracy:

"I was raised a Zionist," writes Ms. Strnad. "Growing up in a Zionist youth group I was accustomed to proudly defining as a Zionist. I often hesitate to self-define that way today. I still believe in the Jewish people's right for self determination and the establishment and legitimacy of our own state, but the policies of that state and the rightward regressive actions of fringe settlers and their supporters have caused me to distance myself from the term Zionism. For those who believe in human rights and democracy the "z" word is now beyond the pale. It is whispered in hushed tones and understood only as what the right wing preaches and implements as policy. The Zionism that was once a broad nationalism has been distorted and replaced by racist and xenophobic fears that drive unjust and dehumanizing policies."

One way I approach the issues Sarah grapples with is to differentiate in my own heart between being a "Zionist" and being pro-Israel. Zionism is, as Sarah correctly pointed out, far from a monolithic ideology. But one thing all the strains have in common is very basic: Zionism is the national movement of the Jewish people.

I have never felt a kinship with nationalism of any kind, not American, not Zionist, not any. But I do respect other people's choices, I recognize the validity of national identity and movements and even appreciate the very real uses nationalism has (chief among them, in my view, being the uniting of an oppressed people to collectively combat that oppression, a feature that was indisputably true of Zionism throughout its efforts to create a state or, in some strains, a national homeland for the Jews in Palestine). And that respect and appreciation extends equally to Palestinian nationalism as much as it does to that of my own, Jewish people.

So I'm not a Zionist. Neither am I an anti-Zionist. I suppose non-Zionist fits, though it seems a rather empty term. But none of these categories has any bearing on being pro-Israel.

It is in that context that I both understand and have a strong visceral reaction to what has happened to the term "Zionist." On one hand, it has become a pejorative, used by some on the left as a synonym for "racist" and worse. On the other, it has been completely co-opted by the far right supporters of the settlement program and apologists for the worst breaches of law and human rights that Israel commits. [*Note: I am not talking here about the well-worn practice of dedicated anti-Semitic groups, such as white supremacist groups, and other extremists, religious and otherwise, to use "Zionist" as a substitute for the word "Jew." That's a serious issue as well, but it's only propagandistically linked to the Palestinian issue and has been a constant since well before Israel was created. It's a serious issue, just not the one I'm discussing here*] Thus, the most racist aspects of Zionism have increasingly and distressingly become its face, which feeds the demonization of Zionism, which strengthens the racists, on and on in and endless cycle.

Both those groups have one thing in common: whether they recognize and admit it or not, they are both working tirelessly for the destruction of Israel as it is understood by most mainstream Israelis, Jews and others who are sympathetic to the legitimate security and national expressions of the Jewish people. Whether by working to eliminate Israel as a home for the Jewish people (which, I hasten to add, is *not* necessarily the goal of all those who advocate a single state solution) or to destroy the very heart of the Zionist dream with constant belligerence, expansion of settlements and hubristic defiance of international norms and human rights, both of these groups are working toward Israel's demise. The so-called "Zionist" settlers are having a lot more impact toward that goal, in fact.

It is a mistake to equate "Zionism" and "pro-Israel". The two terms are not interchangeable; in my case, I am comfortable and strongly identify with the latter label, but not the former. But I've also studied Zionism in all its forms for over a quarter century, in both academic and independent settings, and the distortion of the term in modern days annoys me endlessly.

One cannot say, with a straight face, that Zionism is not an integral part of Israeli behavior toward the Palestinians. A "Zionism of land" is precisely the reason for the settlement enterprise and all its concomitant evils. It is a key ingredient (as is, to be sure, Palestinian nationalism in its own extreme form) in the program of "putting the Palestinians on a diet" in Gaza, as well as other excesses there. Zionism, like all nationalisms, is susceptible to falling into bigotry, especially when the national movement is victorious and assumes power.

And make no mistake; Zionism is one of the most successful nationalist programs in history. This is particularly true if one subscribes to the view that Zionism, from the first *aliyah* in 1882 until 1948 (or perhaps a bit later) was essentially a movement to secure a state or, in some versions, a national home for the Jewish people. In this, it cannot be doubted that Zionism succeeded, and any serious study of its founding fathers cannot but conclude that it was far more successful in a much shorter period of time than they had ever dreamed it could be.

One can look at what were, admittedly, always minority movements in Zionism, such as the cultural and humanistic Zionism of Ahad Ha'am or the bi-nationalism of Judah Magnes and Martin Buber. And, in those contexts, one must also acknowledge that the fact that those idealists found few if any partners among the Palestinians and other Arabs (at least who would so partner publicly) was one of the reasons their ideologies found little purchase among Jews.

But those strains were there, and that's not all. The larger movements within Zionism, primarily Labor and Revisionist, were also possessed of far higher ideals, each in their own way, in the past. Sure, Labor had a rather colonialist attitude toward the native Arab population, very much in line with typical European liberalism of the early 20th century. And one can make whatever judgments one wishes, with the benefit of hindsight, about the Labor leadership, most notably Chaim Weizmann and David ben-Gurion. But the main thrust of Labor Zionists, the people who made up the constituency, really did believe they could find a way to build a Jewish state and minimize the impact on the Arabs. For more on this, I strongly recommend Tom Segev's *One Palestine, Complete* as well as his *1949:The First Israelis* which explores how that Laborite provincialism even affected Middle Eastern Jewish immigrants to the fledgling state.

The Revisionists, as I've often pointed out, were even more interesting. They were certainly more direct about taking the land from the Arabs, but they also envisioned sharing the land and, crucially, the government of that land with the Arabs, once the Jewish state was established. Years of conflict certainly eroded the humanism in mainstream Zionism, and buried the more progressive strains (though they still exist). But so, I would argue, did the inherent tension between a Jewish state and a democratic one, a tension that was heightened exponentially by the occupation, holding millions of Palestinians under Israeli control without any guaranteed rights for going on 44 years now.

I fear it may well be too late to save the term "Zionism" from being identified with the extremist right, and so from being reduced to a pejorative by anti-Zionists. Instead, what is necessary is to re-define and centralize the term "pro-Israel."

A friend once asked me how I thought it was possible to have a Jewish state that was not inherently racist. Well, many people today who call themselves pro-Israel (but really aren't) don't believe such a thing is possible. And indeed, in their definition of "Jewish state" it isn't. But, to indulge in a bit of wordsmithing again, perhaps if we think more in terms of a Jewish homeland, or, perhaps borrow the Balfour Declaration terminology of a Jewish national home, we might get somewhere.

The Jews do, I firmly believe, need a place we can call our own. Not all Jews feel that need, but enough do to make it a necessity. We do need a place where we can express ourselves collectively as a nation. That does not require demographic controls, nor a set of laws that, whether de jure or de facto, favors Jews over non-Jews. What it requires is a constitution.

An Israeli constitution that formally, fully and specifically guarantees equal rights to all its citizens while expressly identifying Israel as the homeland of the Jews can resolve this tension. This would not satisfy those on the right who have co-opted the term Zionist, but it actually does fulfill the Zionist dream of many of the movement's founders.

Such a constitution would, to be sure, only be realistic in an Israel that is no longer occupying millions of Palestinians, but rather is living side by side with them, and, crucially, enjoys an open border with them so that the remaining Palestinian citizens of Israel are not cut off from their extended families and the Palestinians of a nascent Palestine are still fully connected to their homelands, as are Israeli Jews who will always have a connection to various parts of the West Bank (most notably Hebron). Constitutional guarantees in both a new Israel and a newborn Palestine, probably backed by international guarantees and incentives for at least the early years of such an arrangement, could make this work.

Ultimately, the struggles of both Jewish and Palestinian nationalism are about more than land; they're about rights (human, political and civil), self-determination and national expression. And I do agree with the words of Lara Friedman of Americans for Peace Now, words I've heard her utter many times, most recently at the J Street conference: "The one-state solution is not a solution." I believe each people needs a state of its own, at least for the foreseeable future. But given the realities on the ground—not just settlements, but the growing divergence of politics between Israel and the Palestinians, the divisions among the Palestinians, as well as the growing demand for democracy in all of the Arab world, not least in Palestine—we need to start revising how we think about that two-state solution.

For Jews, and especially Israeli Jews, resolving the tension between the two parts of a "Jewish and democratic state" is the central component of that process. People of good intent have avoided that very tangled web until now. We can no longer afford to do so. We need to find a pro-Israelism that replaces outmoded Zionism and allows an ideology that many of us, so well typified by Sarah Strnad, can feel at home with.

REALISTIC DOVE

Why the Jewish right is terrified by J Street's conference
By Dan Fleshler
February 25, 2011
http://www.realisticdove.org/archives/468

J Street, the political arm of the American Jewish pro-Israel, pro-peace movement, will convene its second national conference on Saturday night. There will be an enormous turnout. An organizer told me that about 2100 people are pre-registered (at their last conference, only 850 people were pre-registered but 1500 people showed up). There will be about 500 students from 100 campuses.

Why are all of these people converging? There are many reasons. They are desperate to find hope in what often seems like a hopeless mess in Israel and the territories. They want answers to troubling questions, like, "Is the 2-state solution dead?" and "What, in God's name. can the U.S. do to help?" They want community. They want inspiration. They crave ideas for mobilizing somnolent American Jews and cowardly U.S. politicians. I'm going, and I want all of those things.

This won't be quite as large as AIPAC's legendary policy conferences, but AIPAC has had more than 50 years to build momentum; J Street is only three year old.

So what is the reaction from the American Jewish and Israeli right? Abject terror.
There is no other way to explain the panicky screeds on the right-wing Judeo blogosphere. Check out these widely-publicized riffs from Noah Pollak of the Emergency Committee for Israel and the permanently truculent folks at Front Page magazine. I won't dignify all their arguments and character assassinations by conveying them here, but one of their objections to the conference is that some of the speakers are, gasp, Arabs who are unhappy with Israel!

American Jews, you see, are not supposed to listen to Arabs who are unhappy with Israel, people with different narratives and perspectives than those of the pro-Israel community, people like James Zogby or Mustafa Barghouti. Spend three minutes reading about Barghouti here, and you will learn about the kind of impassioned, articulate Palestinian nationalist that not all Israelis like very much. But surely all Israelis need to figure out how to live with a neighbor like Mustafa Barghouti.

But Americans Jews, you see, are not allowed to hear him speak. Perish the thought! And, of course, if an organization gives him a podium, that automatically means the organization endorses each and every one of his views. That is an enduring principle of the Jewish thought police. He will be speaking at a panel on Hamas, summarized as follows: "Hamas remains in control of the Gaza Strip, armed and opposed to the existence of the State of Israel. What is the best way to counter the threat posed by Hamas? Is reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah a prerequisite to peace, or would it make peace more difficult to achieve? Can Hamas be neutralized by undermining its popular support among Palestinians or splitting its moderate

elements from its militants?" It would make perfect sense to exclude Palestinians from the ground who actually know what they are talking about from such a panel, wouldn't it? American Jews are not supposed to hear from Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, the physician and friend to many Israeli moderates whose daughters were tragically killed by Israeli forces during Operation Cast Lead. Perish the thought! We must not hear about his experiences or his lovely, lost daughters because, Front Page asserts, he denounced the Israelis but not Hamas. We must run the other way if we see him coming.

Front Page sums up the other principal objection: "Any illusion that J Street has included these speakers merely to give insight into "the other side" is dispelled by the roster of Jewish speakers scheduled to speak at `Giving Voice to Your Values.' All are leftists, and most are even more radically anti-Israel than the Islamists who will appear." There are certainly a lot of leftists, and it is not hard to show that they are, in fact, pro-Israel. But what scares these righties more than anything, I think, is all of the thoroughly mainstream, centrist speakers who are also gracing J Street with their presence: Knesset Members from Kadima; Dennis Ross; Kenneth Pollack of Brookings; Patrick Clawson of the Washington Institute for Near East Peace; Tom Dine, who used to run AIPAC; Ethan Felson of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs; Rabbi David Sapirstein, head of the Religious Action Center of the Reform movement–the largest synagogue movement in the US.

"Censorship reflects a society's lack of confidence in itself," wrote Justice Potter Stewart. And that is what is going on here. We are listening to the sputterings of an insecure right wing that has no answers. They have no suggestions about the Israeli-Palestinian situation other than grim, bloody "conflict management," which should really be called "nightmare management." They have no notion of how to preserve the democratic Jewish state. They don't know how to stop the steady drift of young people out of the American Jewish community because what is happening to the Palestinians cannot be reconciled with either Jewish or universal values.

And they are panicking. They want us to put our hands over our ears, like the haredim who don't want to hear women's voices singing, or the fanatics who want to burn down the offices of newspapers that print cartoons of the prophet Muhammed. Sorry folks. It won't work. Thousands of American Jews and others will show up in DC this weekend, eager to hear complicated truths and nuanced arguments, instead of the useless pablum of those who cling to a horrific status quo.

'Israel to opt democracy or occupation'
March 1, 2011
http://www.presstv.ir/detail/167646.html

US pro-Israel lobby group J Street says Israeli authorities will have to eventually decide between being "Jewish and democratic" or remaining in occupation of Palestinian lands.

In J Street's second annual conference in the Washington Convention Center on Saturday night, the president of the leftist organization, Jeremy Ben Ami, said that "the answer to the Israel-Palestinian conflict will determine the future of Israel," Ha'aretz reported.

"We believe that the Palestinians too must have a national home of their own, living side by side with Israel in peace and security. This is in Israel's interests. It is in America's interests. It is right and it is just," he added.

He said that Tel Aviv must choose among three options: "being a Jewish homeland, remaining democratic and maintaining control over all the land between the Jordan and the Mediterranean."

"Israel can have only two of the three. It can only be both Jewish and democratic by giving up the land on which a Palestinian state can be built in exchange for peace," Ami stated.

This is while the Israeli embassy refused an invitation to attend the conference. Five Kadima and Labor members of the Israeli parliament (Knesset), however, were present at the meeting.

Ben Ami criticized Israeli Ambassador to the US Michael Oren for making "an enormous mistake" by being absent from the conference.

I think that "to meet only with the people that you agree with is not the way you conduct diplomacy and not the way the ambassador of Israel should relate to the US Jewish community," he said.

US says will keep pressure on Iran
March 1, 2011
http://www.presstv.ir/detail/167647.html

US President Barack Obama's Middle East adviser Dennis Ross has insisted that Washington would continue putting more pressure on Iran.

"We will keep an eye on Iran and the pressure on," Ross made the remarks at the J Street's annual conference in Washington on Monday.

J Street is a liberal Jewish lobbying group that presents itself as an alternative to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee — one of Washington's most powerful lobbies.

"While the door will always remain open for diplomacy, but we remain determined to prevent Iran from acquiring the nuclear weapons and we won't be deflected from this goal," Israeli daily Ha'aretz quoted him as saying.

The US official once again accused Tehran of pursuing nuclear weapons, an allegation refuted by the Islamic Republic repeatedly.

This is while the latest US National Intelligence Estimate reiterated its 2007 position that US spy agencies have concluded that Iran is not after nuclear arms.

Meanwhile, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on Friday confirmed the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear energy program, saying that the program has never been diverted to nuclear weapons production.

The IAEA report, however, says Tehran must halt its uranium enrichment activities, as demanded by four United Nations Security Council resolutions.

Iran says it needs nuclear energy to meet its growing domestic demand for electricity and to provide fuel for the Tehran research reactor, which produces medical isotopes for cancer treatment.

Iran is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and thus has the right to enrich uranium to produce fuel.

US vows Israel on jittery ME situation
March 1, 2011
http://www.presstv.ir/detail/167639.html

Top US Middle East advisor Dennis Ross says the Israeli regime should draw lessons from the Egyptian revolution with respect to the Palestinian issue and that the status quo was "unsustainable."

Addressing an audience on the third day of the J Street's annual conference in Washington on Monday, Ross said," If Israel can view one lesson from the events in Egypt; it is the danger of getting stuck with an unsustainable status quo."

"Just as the frustrations in Egypt grew over time," he said, "we should all recognize that the conflict with the Palestinians will only become more intractable over time."

The White House advisor insisted that despite all the budgetary challenges, the United States will continue supporting Israel's security needs, including the funding of the "Iron Dome" missile defense system.

"Change in Egypt has created concern for many in the region; Egypt has been a pillar for Israel's pursuit of peace. The last thing we want to see is extremists benefit from the situation," the Obama assistant maintained, adding that with regards to Israel "it's [in] the interest of Egypt that the peace becomes warmer, not colder."

Changing the topic to Iran, the top US official said, "we will keep an eye on Iran and the pressure on. While the door will always remain open for diplomacy, but we remain determined to prevent Iran from acquiring the nuclear weapons and we won't be deflected from this goal."

The US and its allies have been repeating their unsubstantiated claims that Iran is intent on engaging in a nuclear weapons program, an allegation that has been proven false by every IAEA (The International Atomic Energy Agency) report on Iran's civilian nuclear program. Tehran has also vehemently rejected such claims as more publicity than substance.

The IAEA's recent report has just reconfirmed the non-diversion of Iran's nuclear program towards a military objective.

Emily L. Hauser – In My Head

Why I still call myself a Zionist.
By Emily Hauser
February 23, 2011
http://emilylhauserinmyhead.wordpress.com/2011/02/23/why-i-still-call-myself-a-zionist/

As I get ready to go to the J Street conference this weekend, I find myself grappling with all those lovely issues that an American-Israeli peace activist must occasionally grapple with. What shoes to wear? What books to bring in the carry-on? Why do I still insist on applying to myself that much maligned descriptor "Zionist"?

I mean honestly, haven't I gotten the memo? Zionists "barely resemble humans," as one tweet recently had it. None of the cool, peace-n-justice loving kids are Zionists anymore! C'mon now!

There are a handful of reasons for my mulishness, however, and they start from the most simple: Words mean things.

"Zionist" does not mean "fascist" or "imperialist" or "running dog" or even "baby-killer." It means "Jewish nationalist." So there's that. I am forever getting hung up on the fact that words have actual, working definitions.

And then there's the fact that I firmly believe that my side (the Israeli/Jewish side) has absolutely no business telling the other side (the Palestinian side) how to define themselves or their terms. They get to define themselves, not me. And so, *ipso facto,* I'm not willing to say that those who have issues with Israeli government policy — no matter how deep and just the issues may be — now have a right to define my people and our terms for us.

And finally, if I am accepting of — indeed, promoting of — Palestinian nationalism, I cannot find any way clear to denying my own people their nationalism.

I have questions about nationalism. Big questions. I genuinely believe (as I've said before) that nationalism is a stage in human development and we will, one day, please God, achieve something better.

But that day is not yet here.

And if nationalism is still the world's current geopolitical organizing principle (and it is, whether I like it or not), and I accept, promote and support Palestinian nationalism — well then, Jews have the same right to their own nationalist visions and dreams.

Jews had long shared a language and a culture and a deeply beloved land when the notion of modern nationalism first came into vogue in the late 19th century — the fact that we hadn't lived on that land for centuries was because we had been brutally thrown off it and hounded across the globe. It was not a choice, a usurpation — it was a rolling genocide that failed. My people prayed to return to that land three times a day, in a language and within a cultural heritage that

spanned centuries. If that doesn't constitute the building blocks of the modern construct we know as "nationalism," I don't know what does.

And so: If I support Palestinian nationalism, I cannot in good conscience tell my own people to drop theirs. If I believe that my people has no right to tell the Palestinians what to call themselves, I cannot in good conscience tell my people that their words are rank and vile and must be got rid of. And if I believe that we have a duty to use language in order communicate the truth — not pull it and push it so that it fits in the boxes that best serve our political ends — then I cannot in good conscious quietly accept the viciousness and vitriol (and often barely-veiled antisemitism) that pass for "a definition of Zionism" among many who fight alongside me for the rights of the Palestinian people.

I don't wear the word with much ease, it's true. Too many have attached too much hate to it now, and, as I said, I'm not entirely sure that I'm fully on-board with nationalism, of any kind, anymore. I surely won't argue with Jews who say they just can't apply that word to themselves at this point, particularly if they have transcended nationalism in their own personal ideology.

But until I'm convinced that nationalism is no longer the path we must trod for the forseeable future, until I'm convinced that Israelis and Palestinians alike are willing and able to give up the dreams of decades and centuries and throw in their lot with each other, I will still use the dreaded Z word.

It comes down to this: I cannot believe that supporting Palestinian rights demands that I turn my back on my own people. And so I won't.

Emily L. Hauser – In My Head

Newsflash! Networking is good. (Or: J Street soup for the middle aged soul).
By Emily Hauser
March 1, 2011
http://emilylhauserinmyhead.wordpress.com/2011/03/01/j-street-conference-networking/

Bottom line, I need to get out more.

I've been a freelance writer, working from home, for years and years. For the past nine of those years, I haven't even done much reporting, working instead on commentary or book reviews or whatever projects arrive through the ether, and as a result, in the course of my workday, I nearly never have to leave the house.

Which probably goes at least some of the way toward explaining how thrilling I found the J Street Conference.

Oh.**My**.***GOD!!***

My 11 year old son put it best when he described the conference to his friend as being "like ComicCon, for peace advocates." I spent about 52 hours doing almost nothing but being knocked off my feet.

First, there was getting to see a small handful of wonderful, wonderful friends who I love very much but only rarely get to see.

Then, there were all the people who I "know," but had neverever met: people from J Street (full disclosure: Because I so thoroughly believe in their work, I do a fair amount of contract writing for J Street), people from the Twitter world (who, it should be noted, are generally much bigger than their thumbnail pictures), people from the world of peace activism, people from the world of Middle East geekery, people from several of those worlds combined.

Then there were all these Amazing Writers and Thinkers and Doers from the various worlds of progressive politics and academia and wonkery and diplomacy who I've admired from afar for some shockingly geeky amount of time and who were *right there*! A few of whom I just walked up to and *shook hands with*! And *had conversations with*!

It's a sign of my absolutely irredeemable eggheadedness that I very nearly squeed over some of these last. Among the people with whom I got to exchange a few words during those 52 hours were:

1. **Congressman Keith Ellison** – Democrat from Minnesota, the first Muslim to serve in Congress, one of the very few members of our legislative branch to ever go to the Palestinian territories, and an all-together incisive, sharp, and warmly approachable man.

2. **Robert Malley** – aside from anything else (and there is much else), author of some of the most important and honest writing you will ever find about the 2000 Camp David negotiations, at which Ehud Barak did *not* make a "generous offer" and President Clinton stabbed the Palestinians in the back.
3. **Adam Serwer** – one of my favorite writers dealing with the various intersections of politics and culture and general bullshit-cutting-through — also smart, funny, and gracious, particularly given that I essentially roped him into 20 minutes of conversation with me and two other people I knew only slightly better than he, because he happened to pass by as we were talking about Twitter, and his is one of my favorite Twitter feeds. And he laughed at one or two of my attempts at humor, thus endearing himself to me forever and ever, amen.
4. **Matthew Yglesias** – another super smart writer, who did some amazing work out of Hebron not long ago, and who wields his humor-fu rather as one might use a very, very good carving knife.
5. **Matt Duss** – yet another super smart writer, who did some amazing work out of Herzlia not long ago, and who towered above me by about three feet but who chatted so amicably that I did not feel at all like the midget I am.
6. **Mona Eltahawy –** an absolutely riveting Egyptian journalist/analyst who was all over the airwaves and intertubes during the Egyptian uprising (just watch her joy in the wake of Mubarak's resignation!).
7. **Barbara Slavin** – the charming author of the excellent *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the US, and the Twisted Path to Confrontation*.

And that, my friends, is but a partial list.

On the "I got to listen to them live OMG!!1!" list are:

Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg (*I know!!*); **Roger Cohen** of the New York Times, even better live than he is on the page; **Imam Feisel Abdul Rauf**, chairman of the Cordoba Initiative ("Ground Zero Mosque") and a soft-spoken American interfaith leader (and who, in his comments, consistently made surprising references to football); **Peter Beinart**, academic and writer of many things, but lately known in particular for his *cri de coeur* "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment"; **Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish**, author of the heartbreaking *I Shall Not Hate*, and a passionate co-existence advocate, despite the deaths of three of his daughters and a niece at the hands of the Israeli military; and **Sara Benninga**, founder and organizer with the game-changing Israeli anti-settlement movement, Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity, with which my family and I marched in November.
And again: The list is partial.

But by far the most emotional, indeed thrilling, part of the conference was the very fact of it. To be in a series of rooms with some 2,500 people, the vast majority of them American Jews, all of them dedicated to a peaceful Israel and the freedom and dignity of the Palestinian people was profoundly moving. Hearing them cheer and clap as speaker after speaker said things like "if you're truly pro-Israel, then you must be pro-Palestinian" was unutterably gratifying. Seeing the passion in their eyes, hearing the gratitude and relief in their voices, watching them gird their loins to ascend Capitol Hill and lobby America's legislature for an end to war and the beginning

of justice, it was — it was something else. It was inspiring. It was affirming. It was genuinely, deeply powerful. (And we all know that for me, the well of inspiration and affirmation on this issue has run rather dry of late).

Some moments were less than sterling. I did stifle a yawn or two. I certainly found myself in disagreement with folks now and then, and if Member of Knesset Nahman Shai had gone on for even three more seconds declaring the siege of Gaza (aka: the collective punishment of 1.6 million human beings) justified because Hamas still holds Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit captive — I might well have made a scene.

And, more full disclosure: I have in fact seen and heard a few people complaining about the conference or the organization, for various odd and often stupid things — folks who are clearly dedicated to the infallibility of their own opinions, or to the notion that it's best to be associated with a group that is pure (even if tiny), or (indeed) the vital import of particular vocabulary choices (really: one writer pilloried J Street president Jeremy Ben Ami for not using the word "occupation" in his opening speech — at a conference wholly dedicated to ending the occupation).

But, you know: Whatevs.

The vast majority of the people at the conference came to learn, to get energized, and to do the work, the work being continuing the fight for a just, two-state resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — peace, freedom and dignity for all in Israel/Palestine.

And that, my friends, was thrilling to be a part of.

And (I believe) would have been thrilling even if I were a smidge less house-bound.

Emily L. Hauser – In My Head

On leaving the cave, or: Lessons learned.
By Emily Hauser
March 2, 2011
http://emilylhauserinmyhead.wordpress.com/2011/03/02/j-streetlessons-learned/

This past weekend, I left the cozy comfort of my wee little home office (in which — I would just like to say — I do not work in pajamas. Though I do often wear slippers) and ventured into what Betsy Ray might have called The Great World.

Lessons, as they say, were learned.

1. Though my feet and legs were willing and able to take one for the team and gambol about airports, public transportation, and the halls of the Washington Convention Center in black suede heels for three solid days — they did not enjoy it. Certainly not on day three.
2. A smart-phone in one's pocket is an excellent way to sort the muddled and over-stimulated mind. Is he the one who wrote that book? Is she the one who said that thing? Why, Google's your pal!
3. Women's trousers *need deeper pockets*. My mother — a tall woman who has struggled her whole life to find women's trousers that fit well — has been saying this for years, but I think it's truer than ever in the age of smart-phones in your pocket. Because, sure: Most of my personal belongings were in a work-appropriate purse. But I had my phone in my pocket all the time — because it was on vibrate, *because I am polite*. I'm just grateful that every time it escaped the shallow confines of my stupid girly pocket, the thump made by my (brand new and hardly cheap!) BlackBerry was good and attention-getting.
4. At any given moment, no matter my level of despair or the lies and prevarications told by those who would tear down rather than build up, there is someone, somewhere thinking good, creative thoughts about how to establish peace between Israel and the Palestinians, Jews and Muslims, Americans and the world — and not just thinking, but acting.

This last is a particularly important thing for me to remember, now that I'm back in my cave.

I'm very easily given to despondency over the chances for a just and genuine two-state peace for Israel/Palestine, a peace in which Palestinians get the support they deserve in overcoming the results of decades of a malign occupation, and Israeli Jews get to live without fear as Israel ceases to be the one place on earth in which it is genuinely dangerous to be a Jew — and Israel's Palestinian citizens get full rights and opportunities, as the citizens of any democracy are entitled to enjoy.

I've been fighting this fight since the first intifada, when I came to the conclusion that Israel had two choices: Get rid of all the Palestinians, one way or the other, or agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state. As I couldn't support the former, it struck me that I should work for the latter. And nearly a quarter of a century later, here we are — so close to that peace on paper that you can all but smell it, and yet so much farther away on the ground that it may already be impossible.

But despair is a luxury, and an insult to all of the fine and brave people I saw this weekend.

There before me stood Fox New's bogeyman, the gentle Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, quietly quoting Jewish scripture and reminding us that "the real battle is between the moderates of all faith communities, and the radicals of all faith communities."

There was grieving father and native Gazan Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, calling on each person present to "relieve himself of Otherness and wear just the robe of humanity."

There was Peter Beinart, reminding us of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's teaching that the holiness of the land of Israel depends on the holiness of its people, adding "if the land of Israel was not holy in the time of Terah the idol maker, neither can it be holy in the time of Leiberman, and Netanyahu, and Ovadia Yosef."

There was Sara Benninga, describing her several arrests for nonviolent activism — and the more harrowing experience of her friend and fellow-arrestee, also picked up for nonviolent protest, because he'd had the temerity to protest while Palestinian. "I ask you," she said, "how would you react if your government treated your Constitution as empty words? I have chosen to fight."

There was Daniel Levy, member of Israel's delegation to the 2001 Taba negotiations and lead Israeli drafter of the Geneva Accords, saying loud and clear: "Lieberman is the bastard child of the demographic analysis of why we need to end the occupation. You cannot treat the Arab Palestinian public as a demographic threat and advocate full equality inside Israel."

And there was Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, Palestinian politician and activist, asking us to please remember the words of Palestinian poet laureate Mahmoud Darwish: "If only Israelis would realize how afraid we are of their fear."

I have to listen to these voices, every day. I have to carry them into my work, and be true to what they demand of me. Might it all still end horribly? Certainly. But not for lack of effort on the parts of the people like those who spoke at and attended the 2011 J Street Conference. Not for lack of my own effort.

Time to take off the heels, and put my Docs back on. They're better for the long haul, and that's what what I'm in this for.

Update: If you want to watch some of these amazing speakers doing their thing, click here for a great trove of video and background. (If you want to watch the excellent Bernard Avishai, Daniel Levy, and Roger Cohen, feel free to skip right past the Dennis Ross comments, to the 42 minute mark. Ross said nothing new, and might very well piss you off. Lord knows he pissed off a large number of conference attendees!)

J Street Offers Alternative to AIPAC
By Jon Basil Utley
March 7, 2011
http://original.antiwar.com/utley/2011/03/06/j-street-offers-alternative-to-aipac/

Hundreds of Jewish activists from J Street visited congressional offices on March 1 to talk about Israel and the settlements and to present a pro-peace agenda against the dominant views of the most powerful lobby in Washington, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

The visits followed their second major convention with representatives from all over America giving voice to Jews who want an end to the settlements on the West Bank and a viable peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. They also focused on Israel's government being controlled by its ultra-Orthodox and hard-line, expansionist Likudniks against Jews with modern humanist values. A panel attended by leading Israelis decried the vitriol against them from fanatical fundamentalists in Israel who want more settlements. Indeed, a key panel was titled "Is The Settlement Enterprise Destroying Israel's Democracy?"

Several members of Congress who participated in one of the panels all thanked J Street for presenting its case and giving those concerned for Israel's long-term viability another position than that of AIPAC's pro-occupation and settlement-expansion promotions.

At the closing banquet, founder Jeremy Ben-Ami stated that J Street is now the third largest Jewish organization in America, with chapters in 30 states and on 50 college campuses. Around 2,300 persons attended the conference, including 500 college students. Sixty members of Congress and 84 rabbis attended the final banquet. Just three years after its founding, J Street now has a staff of 50 and a $7 million budget. Ben-Ami stated that J Street was founded to "save the dreams of the founders of Israel." He deplored how Israel's government was bringing about "international isolation and the loss of Jewish values," a constant theme of speakers on the various panels. Over and over I heard from the panels how Jews should not be expected to "check Jewish values at the door" when it came to Palestinians, that they could not tell their children that Jewish values were dependent upon nationality and circumstance.

The worldly attendees and the fact that Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg showed her support by introducing the keynote speaker all gave the group national credibility against those who vilify Jews who challenge the violence and brutality of the occupation as "self-hating Jews."

At the dinner, I sat next to a young woman who had started the J Street chapter at Brandeis University. She told me how the group represented values she had been searching for on campus. She explained how most of her classmates opposed the settlements but feared that any criticism would reduce support for Israel. J Street argues that it is Israel's actions that have already hurt its moral case and isolated it from most of the world.

A theme stressed in several panels was that the settlements were undermining the whole rule of law inside Israel. Michael Sfard, legal counsel in Israel to Peace Now, a very large group with offices in America, said that the police would not investigate or charge rabbis who ignored subpoenas and otherwise violated the laws and that Orthodox rabbis now say that working on the Sabbath is permitted if done to build settlements. They also are now demanding separate public buses for males and females. On the same panel longtime settlement critic Gershom Gorenberg urged Washington to stop financing the settlements and demand that Israel enforce its own laws.

A documentary film, *Between Two Worlds*, about the Jewish Film Festival in San Francisco, showed the conflicts among Jews over Israel's policies. The furor came from the decision to show a movie about Rachel Corrie, the young American woman who was run over by an Israeli bulldozer when she tried to protest its demolishing of Palestinian homes and livelihoods in Gaza. The movie shows the evolution of a Holocaust survivor, his activist wife, and his modern American daughters.

Palestinian non-violent resistance (which is joined by many Israeli and foreign Jews) was explained as the most successful way of resisting the military occupation. A movie, *Budrus*, was shown about how non-violent resistance saved a small town in Palestine from being demolished by the path of the Israeli wall.

At the panels I attended, however, I heard nothing about the Christian Zionists in America who give political power and cover to AIPAC and the occupation. Surprisingly, at one panel, which analyzed voting patterns, the spokesmen were at a loss to explain widespread and deep support among Republican leaders for the settlements. Speakers concluded that it must be for campaign donations. They seemed oblivious to the tens of millions of evangelicals who give unstinting political support and generous funding to the most provocative settlements. Their love of Israel has a condition, though: they want Israel's actions to help hurry up their God's second coming, which will result in the deaths of all the world's peoples who don't convert to Christianity. At the same Washington Convention Center that hosted the J Street meeting, former Republican congressional leader Tom Delay several years ago attended a meeting of the group Christians United for Israel. Questioned about the "end times," he answered, "Obviously, it's what I live for. I hope it comes tomorrow!" For details on these fundamentalists' thinking, see my article "The Strangest Alliance in History."

A panel on the "Struggle to Protect Democracy" inside Israel featured several Israelis. Hagai El-Ad, executive director of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, Israel's ACLU, complained that "anti-democrats" had opened the floodgates in trying to intimidate and silence those opposed to unlimited government and the rule of law. He called them "proto-fascists" because they physically threatened their opponents who supported minority rights, democratic procedures, justice, and free speech. He said, however, that of 20 bills they introduced in the Knesset, all were defeated. He feared, however, for the future as they were growing more powerful and dangerous. Naomi Chazan, president of the New Israel Fund and former deputy speaker of the Knesset, warned that Israel was in a "democratic crisis" and would not survive if it did not sustain democracy. She referred to the demographics of extremely high Orthodox birth rates.

Orthodox Jews get generous government welfare and subsidies for every baby, and they need not work at jobs or serve in the military. Already 27 percent of Israeli children, according to speakers at the 2009 J Street conference, attend yeshiva religious schools that teachonly biblical texts, without any science, math, history, or foreign languages. This, according to a *Los Angeles Times* report, is done with the intention of "shielding students from secular teachings that might shake their faith." The report explained how the Israeli government recently capitulated to the ultra-Orthodox and now subsidizes such schools.

Daniel Ben Simon, a member of the Knesset, elaborated on the fight inside Israel between those with Western and humanist values against those trying to turn Israel into a religious state. He said that Russian immigrants were the third largest party in the Knesset and that most were "not helpful" in sustaining democracy. He complained that Fox News only promoted one viewpoint and never reported on the issues he described.

J Street argues that what is going on inside Israel needs the light of day and full debate in America's Jewish community, that the issues are vital to Judaism, and that the consequences will affect the long-term interests of Israel and America. It argues that Israel's viability, freedom, and democracy depend upon achieving a two-state resolution to the conflict with the Palestinian people.

newvoices
NATIONAL JEWISH STUDENT MAGAZINE

Live from the J Street Conference: Why it's called "J Street"
By David A.M. Wilensky
February 26, 2011
http://blog.newvoices.org/?p=7010

J Street, the political arm of the pro-peace, pro-peace crowd is getting ready for its second annual conference here in DC.

It's 7:30 already and we haven't started the opening plenary–set to being at 7–yet. And now they're announcing that we'll start in 5 minutes. Jews. Am I right?

In other news, the DC convention center–the location of the conference–is on K Street in downtown DC. Then next street over is I Street. (Well, kind of. Massachusetts Avenue screws things up. Whatever.) Anyway, DC notoriously does not have a J Street. And there are a bunch of lobbies on K Street.

So now you're in on the joke. More to come tonight and as the weekend goes on.

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Live from the J Street Conference: "Nearly 500″ Jewish college students, over 2000 total
By David A.M. Wilensky
February 26, 2011
http://blog.newvoices.org/?p=7012

The conference is under way. Rachel Lerner, the head of the conference itself, says that there are more than 2000 people here. I'll buy that. It's packed. The corner nearest the press seating I chose is chock-full of college students. I wonder how many of them them are here.

Rabbi David Saperstein, head of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism is giving his welcoming remarks/pep-talk. "Tikkun Olam, etc." "In 3,000 years, our forebears have insisted that we do not continue for continuity's sake alone." Etc. There's a lot of clapping.

I've seen Saperstein speak before. I've even met him in person before. And I'm still surprised by his speaking abilities. If nothing else–and there's plenty else–he's a powerful and persuasive speaker.

The passion in this room is palpable. Every other sentence Saperstein utters gets two or three people excited enough to start clapping. And their clapping is infectious. And so their tables clap. And then the whole room is clapping.

"Your attraction to people on the left is not that your positions are different from others on the left," Saperstein is saying. But, he says, the attraction is in the political, realistic, mainstream cache J Street maintains. Saperstein says–and I agree–that J Street's ability to take a radical stand when it counts come from its ability to take mainstream positions on other issues. This puts J Street, of course, in stark contrast to other Jewish lefty groups in the US.

"J Street's pro-Israel pro-peace approach is right… is needed now more than ever," Saperstein says. "Neither humanity, nor the countries of Middle East are the prisoners of a bitter and unremitting past."

Now J Street director Jeremy Ben-Ami is talking. Among other groups he cites, he says that there are thousands of Jewish college students (holler!) involved through J Street U across the country.

And I just realized the J Street U Director Daniel May is sitting right next to me.

Jeremy Ben-Ami is now in apologetics mode about J Street, reinforcing adamantly that the group is pro-Israel.

And from there, he transitions into this: Israel wants all the land from the Med. sea to the Jordan, it wants to be democratic and it wants to be Jewish. "It cannot have all three," he says. "It must give up the land to have peace."

He is excited that there are those who disagree with J Street here, from the right and from the left. Disagreement is all a part of the Jewish tradition.

Now he mentions that there are "nearly 500″ college students here. He says that they'r–we're–here because the spirit of open debate attracts young people. Later, some J Street U leaders take the stage and tell us that there are more than 120 college campuses represented at the conference. So take that, old farts.

And just before that, he made a little reference to Birthright's ludicrous refusal to have J Street U Birthright trip–which we covered to death over here. I thought Daniel May's head was gonna pop off when he said that.

There's more to this opening plenary to come, but I'm gonna end the post here. There may be more from me later tonight. If not, Ben Sales and I will be here for the rest of the weekend reporting like there's no tomorrow.

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J Street Conference: Clapping for Hate?
By Ben Sales
February 27, 2011
http://blog.newvoices.org/?p=7027

There's a plenary going on right now at the J Street Conference that's exploring the present democracy movements in the Middle East. Good stuff. Something everyone–and especially the peaceniks here–can get behind. The first two panelists gave unsurprising speeches supporting democracy and the peace process, which elicited some token cheers from a mostly silent crowd.

Then Mona Eltahawy, a vocal journalist from Egypt, started speaking–and there the niceties ended. Here are some things she said about the revolution in Egypt. She began:

"This is not about Israel. None of this is about Israel."

But this, after all, is J Street, so she started talking about Israel. Here's what she said:

"The hatred against Israel will not end" from Egypt until the Palestinians have freedom.

Then the pro-Israel crowd started cheering. She repeated a similar statement, and the crowd cheered even more.

This is a problem. I understand that this crowd, to put it lightly, dislikes the occupation. I know they want to see a Palestinian state. But if they're serious about being pro-Israel, or even about being pro-peace, they need to be anti-hatred.

It is wrong–for anyone–to cheer for hate. It is wrong, at a pro-Israel conference, to cheer someone who professes her hatred for Israel–not her disappointment, not her concern, but her hatred. She can hate whoever she wants. And if J Street wants her to come to their conference and speak at a major session, they can do that too. But when she comes to that pro-Israel conference, starts talking about hatred for Israel and draws the loudest cheer from the crowd, that's bad. It's bad for J Street and it's bad for J Street's supporters if they intend to show their support for the Jewish state.

I believe that J Street and most of its base are pro-Israel. I believe that its platform has the state's best interests in mind. But hearing them cheer for hate, I can understand those who doubt J Street's love for Israel.

J Street Conference: I found the one-man protest. And he's a retired federal judge.
By David A.M. Wilensky
February 27, 2011
http://blog.newvoices.org/?p=7019

Herbert Grossman, retired federal judge, is stationed outside the convention center. His sign says, "J STREET: Quislings, Kapos, Appeasars, the New JUDENRAT." I was surprised to find that there's only the one. And that he's a retired federal judge. I was not surprised to find that he's a tad crotchety.

Q: What are you doing here today?

Grossman: I'm here to let people know that these Jews are selling out their own people.
Q: What are they doing that sells out other Jews?

Grossman: Well, first you have to understand who the people at J Street at. They're Jews who believe the false stereotypes. They believe them and they think that they're not like those Jews and the can blame the other Jews for everything.

Q: So when you hear J Street talking, what you hear is one-sided, directing all blame at other Jews?

Grossan: [Notice his avoidance of the question. He just wants to tell me what he wants to tell me. Which is fine.] They want to say that they're not like other Jews. They say they're humanitarians, they're altruists, but they're really like that. They're more like non-Jews, really. Between each of his sentences there's one or two logical steps missing.

Another highlight from my chat with Grossman: "They're taking on the characteristics of the Ghetto Jew."

Not one to generalize, Grossman added, "They side with the Arabs who are the most intolerant people in the world and they just try to kill people who are different from them."

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J Street Conference: A quarter of this conference is college students
By David A.M. Wilensky
February 27, 2011
http://blog.newvoices.org/?p=7016

I'm a little slow on math. Despite the fact that last night's plenary was full of "there are 2000 people here" and "there are 500 college students here," it didn't dawn on me that, if these numbers are accurate, a quarter of the population of this conference is made up of college students. That's impressive.

I'll be interviewing some of them, and some other people of interest as the day goes on.

I found Abe Katz and Steve Dunmire from Middlebury at the J Street U table in the hallway outside the session rooms.

Q: How did y'all get involved with J Street U?

Katz: I got involved because one of founders of J Street U, [J Street U President Moriel Rothman] is a student at Middlebury and he had a lot of great education programs going at Middlebury , so I got involved that way.

Dunmire: I study Middle East politics and some friends had high praise for J Street, so I got involved.

Q: What do you think the recent cancellation of the J Street U Birthright trip by Birthright indicates?

Katz: On my Birhtright trip [through Hillel] last summer, J Street came up a couple times and our staff chaperone from Birthright openly said, "Oh, they're crazy," twice. Birthright definitely has a political leaning.

Katz was referring to Birthright's assertion that Birthright is apolitical and because of that, they can't have a J Street-sponsored trip.

J Street Conference: Lots of college students–no press allowed
By David A.M. Wilensky
February 27, 2011
http://blog.newvoices.org/?p=7032

There's a blurry line here at the J Street Conference between press and participant. And between college student and press, insofar as I'm here.
J Street Us tremendous t-shirts

The participants' badges hang on black lanyards, but the press is easy to spot because of our bright orange–just go New Voices, I'm sure–lanyards ours hang on. Every time I see an orange one, I try to get a look at what press they're from. There are a surprising number that say "Press: Freelance" or "Press: Blogger" and more still that say they're from a particular blog with a recognizable name.

And these people are all J Street cheerleaders. It's not as thought there are a ton of right-wing Israel bloggers here. So this class of people exists in a kind of gray area between press and participant.

J Street Press Secretary Amy Spitalnick and the rest of the J Street team have to know that this gray area exists and they have to know how sizable that contingent is because they're the ones approving the press passes. On the other hand, J Street has made a number of sessions closed to the press.

Namely, the entire college Shabbaton the preceded the conference, tonight's J Street U Conversation–which is fine because I wanna go to young professionals happy hour at the same time anyway–and a few other sessions, which I'll get into below.

So why are the college events closed to the press? We asked Spitalnick about it and she said that J Street's policy is that these are closed because they are conversations between college students. I don't think that's much of a reason to close the events to anyone, much less to New Voices. We are the only press outlet in the country that's specifically for, about and by Jewish college students.
Laboring away in the press seating at the back of a plenary session, its New Voices Editor Ben Sales

And to reinforce how frayed the distinction between press and not is, if just about any Jewish college student could be a New Voices writer and/or blogger, what are they doing to make sure that there are no New Voices people registered as students going into these sessions and blogging about it?

There's a similar oddity to the non-college-specific sessions that are closed to the press. If anyone can be a member of the press now–the wordpress, I mean–by starting their own blog,

how do they know there aren't any bloggers who came as regular conference attendees in those sessions? Will they be barring people from using any electronics in those sessions at all?

Those sessions, by the way are:

Finding Your Voice: Having the Conversation on J Street and Israel in Your Community

I can't for the life of me figure out why this one is closed to the press. Maybe because it's a conversation among potential newcomers who won't stay on-message while discussing how to get J Street started in their community.

Talk About Israel: "My Convictions or My Job"?: A Confidential Forum for Clergy Members

No problems, there. I get that.

Threading the Needle: Reframing the Israel Conversation

From the session description: "Inside the Jewish community and out, conversations about Israel are increasingly being shaped by campaigns built around boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) on the one hand and by efforts to counter delegitimization on the other. A number of organizations in the Pro-Israel, Pro-Peace movement–[then it lists some of them, all cosponsors of the conference]–are working collaboratively to frame the conversation differently…."

I think you only need three letters to explain why this one is closed to the press: BDS. J Street is adamantly against BDS, which is has become a major campus issue, so they want to avoid appearances to the contrary.

On the other hand, a later session called Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions in 2011: Who's Afraid of the BDS? is open to everyone, so, as with the Finding Your Voice session, it's not clear to me why this session is closed to the press.

And, of course, all the lobbying stuff on Tuesday is closed to the press.

What confuses me is this: At the opening plenary last night, J Street head honcho Jeremy Ben-Ami said that, unlike AIPAC and other groups of the ilk, J Street's conference is open to people who don't totally agree with J Street, from both the right and the left. If that's case, if a selling point of the organization is openness, dialog and transparency, why are some sessions closed to the press?

Another thing emphasized at the opening plenary was the the number of college students. If the numbers they've been citing are true and there are 2000 people here and 500 of them are college students, then a quarter of the conference is made up of students. They've been talking a lot about how this is proof that the future of the pro-Israel world is J Street and they've said that it's proof that J Street's young people are a strong, important part of the organization. Several of them were given a moment of stage time at the opening plenary itself, including J Street U

President Moriel Rothman, who got the honor of introducing Peter Beinart–the subject of J Street U's confernce t-shirts, which say "Beinart's Army."

So they want to put a spotlight on the faces of their students, but not on what they may actually have to say.

But we know from last year that J Street U can go off-message and can appear to far to the left of the official policies of J Street. As J Street U was just coming into existence at the last conference, the student board dropped the term "pro-Israel" from their name. If you consult their policies, you'll see that they're still pro-Israel, but they did make a point of dropping the term–whatever the reason for that was. (And I'm sure the reason was more innocuous than some of the more paranoid members of the community made it out to be at the time.)

Anyway, them's my thoughts on that. Y'all got anything to add?

newvoices
NATIONAL JEWISH STUDENT MAGAZINE

J Street Conference: Hillel Hearts J Street
By Ben Sales
February 28, 2011
http://blog.newvoices.org/?p=7047

J Street may still be fighting for acceptance in the Jewish community almost three years after its founding, but there's one place where that battle is over and the self-proclaimed "pro-Israel, pro-peace" group has emerged victorious: the college campus.

J Street U displayed its secure position in the established Jewish campus world today by organizing a panel at the J Street conference that included two J Street U college activists and two Hillel professionals. After an introduction by Yale senior Ben Alter, J Street U's East Coast representative, each panelist spoke about his or her view on campus discourse about Israel. Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt, Hillel International's director of campus initiatives, advocated pluralism in the campus pro-Israel conversation and stated Hillel's much-publicized guidelines on which groups are and are not accepted in Hillel's space. The clear implication was that J Street U, regardless of its criticism of Israel and support for Palestinian rights, falls within the bounds. Rabbi Lisa Goldstein, the executive director of the UC-San Diego Hillel, noted that even though Hillel does exclude certain Jewish groups (among others, JVP), every individual Jewish student is welcome in the community regardless of political affiliation. "Being part of the Jewish community does not mean you have to sign on a line that these are your values," she said.

The J Street U panelists conveyed frustration over Hillel's guidelines for inclusion, with one student–Princeton freshman Aliyah Donsky–noting her ambivalence about Hillel's declaring "who was in and who was out." Columbia freshman Cole Leiter spoke about facing tension from Hillel when the school's J Street U chapter decided ot cosponsor a speech by John Ging, the head of UNRWA (the UN Palestinian refugee agency) in Gaza. Leiter said that the group's board members had to sit down with Hillel staff and each state that they were Zionist, after answering a series of other questions. He added that restricting campus discourse is "un-American, undemocratic and simply not Jewish."

But on the whole, the J Street U students seemed to have a good relationship with their respective Hillels. Donsky said that she became involved in Israel activity on campus because a staff person from her Hillel invited her to speak on a panel about the conflict. And Leiter noted that his group ultimately pulled their co-sponsorship of the Ging event because it recognized the value of staying withing Hillel's community.

Other events speak to this recognition as well. While AIPAC won't co-host events with J Street, a couple of months ago Leiter's group hosted an Israel event with LionPAC, Columbia's largest pro-Israel group. In September, Hillel President Wayne Firestone had a productive meeting with the J Street U student board.

To be sure, J Street U will face challneges in the future over its pro-Israel credentials, its commitment to regional peace or its Jewish values. Some donors to Hillel may pull their funding because of J Street U's presence. But as it stands now, they're in and there to stay.

This is a good sign for J Street regardless of its position on the hill. The organization has certainly placed much of its stock in college students–there are about 500 at the conference this year–and that investment looks to be paying off. We'll see whether these student activists will end up being game changers in the American pro-Israel conversation down the line–if they aren't already.

J Street Conference: Not Kosher
By Ben Sales
February 28, 2011
http://blog.newvoices.org/?p=7041

Some people say J Street is too far to the left; others complain that it's too far right. But there's another, more basic reason for Jews to doubt J Street's kashrut:

Its food is literally not kosher.

Of course, plenty of Jewish organizations serve non-kosher food at their events, and that's fine. Given that the vast majority of Jews don't keep strict, certified kosher, there's no reason to foot that bill. But almost all Jewish organizations, and certainly all major ones, make the effort to provide kosher options for those Jews who do require a hekhsher. At the very least, they would offer kosher food for purchase.

Not so with J Street.

When I arrived at the conference this morning, before 8 a.m., I asked a staff person if the breakfast would include kosher options. She told me it would. But when the food arrived, there was nothing kosher to be found–not even fruit. I sufficed with coffee and decided to wait for lunch, when–with an hour of free time–I could rush on the metro to a kosher restaurant.

When that time came, I got ready to hurry out of the conference room only to be told by multiple J Street staffers that there were sandwiches for purchase across the building and yes, some of them were kosher.

You can guess what happened next. I arrived at the sandwich cart and requested the kosher option. I got a blank stare in return, and when I asked the manager she told me she had no idea what I was talking about. She hadn't heard anything about kosher sandwiches. The best they could do, they said, was a regular turkey sandwich with the cheese taken off. No good. I bought a Clif bar, a Nature Valley, a Kit Kat, an apple and a banana. I filled the feast out with some mini Twix I found at a conference table.

Maybe I'm making too much of this, but I think that an intentionally Jewish organization that bases its platform on Jewish values should make more of an effort to respect a basic traditional Jewish practice. This is especially true for J Street, which emphasizes pluralism and acceptance. I think it's great for an organization to encourage myriad political ideologies, but there needs to be space for a multiplicity of religious observances as well. And on perhaps the most practical level, I have trouble thinking about the nuances of US Middle East policy when I haven't eaten all day.

In the future, J Street should consider doing one of the following things:

1. Providing kosher food at its conference.
2. Informing participants, ahead of time, that there will be no kosher food available.
3. Giving participants a guide to kosher restaurants in Washington DC, and enough time to go to those restaurants, eat a meal and return.

Either way, tomorrow I'm coming prepared. Immediately after arriving at my friend's apartment tonight, I went to the Walgreen's and picked up bread, peanut butter (JIF creamy), two blueberry muffins and a stack of Pizza Pringles. It may not be healthy, but at least it's food. Yes, all of it is certified kosher.

And I've already eaten all of the Pringles. For dinner.

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NATIONAL JEWISH STUDENT MAGAZINE

J Street Conference: How and why I disagree with what I said earlier
By David A.M. Wilensky
March 1, 2011
http://blog.newvoices.org/?p=7072

The J Street Conference, a weekend-long affair from which myself and *New Voices* Editor Ben Sales have just returned, was an odd experience for me.

On the one hand, my personal politics bring me to sympathize with J Street. On the other hand, I usually don't know what to think about specific issues within the larger Israel-Palestine debate because it's not a primary issue of mine and I don't do as much reading about as I do about other things. So I often feel unprepared to know what I think about Israel-Palestine issues.

And on the third hand, I was there not only to blog in this opinionated fashion, but to do some more standard objective reporting on college students and J Street U and that sort of thing. So, despite my urge to sympathize with J Street, I had my journalist cap on, which has the distinct effect of making me slightly more skeptical of everything than I otherwise am.

One result of that was my much-discussed (or is that over-discussed?) post on Sunday, J Street Conference: Lots of college students: no press allowed.

After posting it, I had a number of interesting conversations with J Street U staffers, J Street U students, other members of the press and a smattering of other conference attendees. The consensus among virtually everyone that spoke with me about it–except for me–seemed to be that I had lost my mind. By the end of Monday–yesterday, the day *after* I wrote the post–I was inclined to agree, not that I was out of my mind, but that I had been wrong. However, I agree that I was wrong for reasons different from everyone else.

So I'll lay out again the bare bones of what my argument was and what the arguments against me were and then I'll give you the reason I'm now contradicting myself.

My argument was this:

1. There are lots of students here and J Street sees that as a selling point and proof that what they are doing is working.
2. Therefore, J Street should want to encourage the press to spend as much time around those students as possible.
3. Therefore, it makes no sense that the only session that was designated as specifically *for* students–in fact, it was mandatory for them to attend so they could receive their travel stipends, or something like that–was closed to the press.
4. Therefore, I proclaimed that the access of the press to the students at the conference was being stupidly limited.

Here are the wrong reason that others gave for my being wrong:

- Students shouldn't be on the record in college because college is a time for experimentation.

Wrong. Both as a college student and as a campus journalist who has been threatened with lawsuits for just this reason, I see no merit in the notion that people who are legally adult should be given a four year pass on personal responsibility and accountability. While it's bad when mistakes made when people are young come back to bite them in the ass later, this is just an unfortunate potential consequence of being responsible adults in a free society. Unless there's something good about prolonged adolescence and we want to treat college students as children. I certainly don't want that.

- I've already been given a free pass to attend the conference as a member of the press and now I'm complaining that my free pass doesn't give me access to everything that the people who paid get.

This wrongly assumes that I would have come anyway and that I just want everything for free, but I would not have come anyway. It also assumes that I'm only in this racket for all the free stuff and great perks. I don't think I need to explain why that's an odd notion. I was at the conference not just as a member of the press, but to report on what was going on with college students at the conference. Clearly, J Street believes my presence and pursuit of this task to be beneficial to them. Otherwise, they would not have approved my press pass. If that's the case, why would they want to restrict my access to the very thing that I'm there to cover?

- The press has plenty of access to students. In fact, they've been interviewing students in droves all over the place.

I don't disagree with the fact that we had lots of access to students and that we were interviewing lots of them. But this fact does not mean that access to them when they're together as a group should be restricted. If access to them when they're together should be restricted, argue for it on its own merits, rather than arguing for it by saying that there are other times/ways to hear from them.

- Students should get a free and open space to talk about student issues without the intrusion of the press.

This one I buy now, but didn't initially, as opposed to the three reasons above which I didn't buy then and still don't.

I finally talked with J Street U Director Daniel May about it. And he cited one or two of the above reasons, but then he said something to actually worked. He said that J Street U has initiative under development that aren't ready to be made public yet and that those would part of the discussion in the closed student session. So that makes sense.

Thanks to everyone who patiently argued this out with me over the last couple days.

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J Street U has come a long way, and has a long way to go
By Harpo Jaeger
March 2, 2011
http://blog.newvoices.org/?p=7089

I'm really impressed with the passion that the leaders of J Street U bring to their work. At the student session on Sunday night of the J Street conference, they emphasized the role that students can play in the larger movement. This is very satisfying to me personally, since I've felt in the past that J Street U was artificially separated from J Street. Organizationally, a certain amount of autonomy is important – the kerfuffle last year when J Street U dropped the term "pro-Israel" from their name (a decision I'm still grappling with, especially due to some really good conversation on it on Sunday night) shows as much, but I'm glad that J Street U is starting to focus on what students can do to help J Street at large.

J Street U has made remarkable progress in harnessing raw activist power from its students.

People spoke with real passion last night about real, substantive changes that are going on on their campuses. Having been off-campus for the past year, I sometimes felt a bit out-of-place, but I also had an outsider's perspective, and I'll take the liberty of employing that to offer a view of what J Street U needs to focus on moving forward.

As with any grassroots organization with a national focus, the key is organizing. Daniel May, the director of J Street U, spoke to this last night. But due largely to circumstances beyond the control of the organizers of that session, many of the students were distracted, exhausted (the session was at the end of a very long and taxing day), or just not even there. So, moving forward, we need to turn the energy that so many students working with J Street U feel into substantive policy and program proposals. I think the national leadership needs to organize talkback sessions at campuses around the country, with local J Street U chapter heads and national staff in attendance. The aim of these sessions would be to gather feedback on J Street U's campaigns, and to help bring the student activists together in understanding of what needs to be done to effectively carry out those campaigns.

For instance, at the end of Sunday night's session, a few minutes were devoted to a brief update from each of the J Street U national student board's committees on their current work. While it was great to hear from them, I would have preferred a format that a) allowed each of the committee representatives more than the about 30 seconds they were each allotted for their update, and b) was more of a two-way discussion. I can identify at least one proposed/potential program that was named there that I think is just a bad idea. I don't know the political calculus behind this proposal, but that's exactly the point. These are conversations we need to have.

J Street U has already made incredible progress. They've built a functioning national leadership structure mostly from scratch, gone through some very difficult political decision-making

processes, and vastly increased their membership. They're no longer a "new" organization. As such, they (the leaders, and we, as constituents) have some big choices to make going forward.

The extent to which we're able to inspire campus activists to look beyond the next campaign, the next speaker, the next debate, and to think (inter)nationally at this moment will make or break the organization in the future.

Daniel Levy said at the conference, "There won't be another J Street." The same is true of J Street U. The campus Israel-Palestine activism scene is crying out for a group like J Street U.

We are positioned to transform the political landscape on Israel-Palestine and more, but we're not going to get another chance. We need to get it right now.

The Energizer Rabbi

J Street Conference
By Margaret Frisch Klein
March 9, 2011
http://web.me.com/rebfrischklein/The_Energizer_Rabbi/Blog/Entries/2011/3/9_J_Street_Conference.html

This past week I attended the J Street conference in Washington DC. It was exciting, thrilling, fascinating, and exhausting. Two thousand people gathered at the Washington Convention Center to hear experts talk about peace in the Middle East, to network with each other, and to have fun talking and debating the issues. The J Street staff did a fabulous job constructing a conference that gave voice to a variety of views, and made it clear that those views are welcome within mainstream American Judaism. Rabbi David Saperstein from the Religious Action Center even explained in his keynote address that he doesn't always agree with J Street, and, yet, praised lay leaders and rabbis for having the courage to speak our minds. You can watch Rabbi Saperstein's speech and the moving opening session that included remarks by author Peter Beinart, Israeli activist Sara Benninga, and Gazan peace activist Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, talking about their values and the urgency of ending the conflict.

Let me be frank. J Street shares my views and my values as a Jew and a rabbi. The title of the conference, Giving Voice To Our Values, seems especially apt. Privileged to receive a scholarship to attend, I stayed at the homes of my step-daughter and my husband's cousin, further reducing my cost. Not everyone in the Jewish community agrees with J Street. Although 600 rabbis have joined the rabbinic cabinet, some are afraid to rock the boat with their congregations. I attended two "just for clergy" sessions to talk about our convictions or our jobs. People's practical suggestions filled me with hope. Keeping the dialogue open and presenting a wide range of opinions, as I do, helps. The former executive director of AIPAC spoke as part of a panel on the current Middle East revolutions. He said that when asked about AIPAC and J Street, his response is that he is so pleased to welcome another pro-Israel voice to the mix that is energizing the American Jewish community. AMEN!

Nonetheless, the congregation that I serve has an Israel Committee that wants to counter what they see as J Street's propaganda. What "propaganda"? They are concerned that the J Street U, the college campus program, promotes peace at the expense of Israel. J Street and J Street U remain unequivocally pro-peace AND pro-Israel, proponents of a two-state solution that includes human rights for Palestinians. To American Jews who see only the threat posed by Palestinians, Iran, and events unfolding in the Middle East: I am sorry—but my Jewish values call upon me to speak out.

Our Jewish tradition—and the halacha (law)—are clear. We are to seek peace and pursue it, to actively chase after it, not to wait for it to come to us. Consider how many songs and pieces of liturgy hold peace as a high value. In order for my high school students to earn dessert the other night, they had to do precisely that. We are not to sit idly by while our neighbor bleeds. (Lev. 19). When waging war and besieging a city, we are not to cut down fruit trees (Deuteronomy

16). We are not to hold a grudge (I wrote an entire rabbinic thesis based on this learning), and we are to welcome the stranger. These are core Jewish values. Nonetheless, peace is complicated, as I relearned last March when I was in Israel, and holding those values when security is threatened can be difficult. Even so, we have an obligation to try and then to try again. For me, that is the message of the story of Hagar and Ishmael. After they have been sent out and the bread and water (valuable resources in the desert) have run out, Hagar prays, "Don't let me watch while the boy dies." How desperate do you have to be not to pray, "Don't let my child die". She sees no other way, much like mothers of suicide bombers and mothers of IDF soldiers see no other way. It is our obligation to continue to look for alternatives—to actively seek peace.
J Street has recorded and posted several sessions and recommends the following videos:

Top Obama Middle East adviser Dennis Ross' address to the conference and the immediate, insightful reaction by a panel featuring author Bernie Avishai, New American Foundation's Daniel Levy, and New York Times columnist Roger Cohen. Ross felt strongly that, having served 5 administrations, the relationship between Israel and the US has never been more secure. He also said that there is no substitution for negotiation in order to produce peace. Reform and peace are two pillars necessary for building that peace, and the status quo is not sustainable. Both side's needs must be addressed; peace won't come from unilateral moves. The panel, in a rare, almost comical, opportunity responded without Ross being in the room.

A roundtable of Knesset Members analyzed the state of affairs in Israeli politics and policy. The panel included Yoel Hasson (Kadima), Shlomo Molla (Kadima), Nachman Shai (Kadima), Daniel Ben Simon (Labor), and Orit Zuaretz (Kadima). Barbara Slavin moderated. As was pointed out, it represented a broad spectrum of Israeli society—the face of modern Israel, a sabra born of Holocaust parents, a Moroccan born in Tunisia, a Russian, married to a Libyan Jew, who herself converted to Judaism, a Sudanese, and a sabra. There was an opening statement that the five of them agreed upon. Here was a lively give and take among Israelis, but what about criticism from outside Israel? There was caution about the overuse of delegitimization as an argument. One MK felt strongly that it is "too fake". he had heard the Prime Minister, the previous week, saying the world is against Israel, against Jews, and he feels that is just not true. "Israel is a superpower." There was also discussion, among panel members, about other internal issues facing Israel—the demographics, the role of women, the role of the Orthodox community in making a coalition. Again, not easy stuff, but very, very important.

A discussion of the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, and the pro-reform demonstrators taking to the streets in Yemen, Algeria, Jordan, Libya and beyond. Journalist Mona Eltahawy, Director General of The Peres Center for Peace Ron Pundak, and United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Robert Serry participated — with Steve Clemons, the Executive Vice President at the New America Foundation, moderating.

This session was fascinating, because the panelists clearly stated that this is a tsunami and no one—none of the pundits—can know the outcome. Ron Pundak was clear that the only way to peace and security for Israel, is to achieve peace with the Palestinians. Mona Ehahawy is a terrific, powerful and passionate speaker who was happy to share her excitement of being in Tunisia and Egypt. She pointed out that not everything is about Israel and anti-semitism, and that some of the dictators overthrown were 10 days to late. She urged the US and Israel not to be 10

days too late. She quoted someone who said that his feet are in Tunisia, his mind is in the West, but his heart is in the East, with the Palestinians. We should not be naive to think that the uprising for freedom and dignity will not spread to the Palestinians, who will want their own.

Three panels I attended that were not streamed are worthy of note. I went to one about discussing the two state solution with our Christian neighbors. As a former president of the Greater Lowell Interfaith Leadership Alliance, this session was very meaningful and took dialogue to the next level. It spoke about how to have difficult conversations with Christians about why Israel is important to us—and to them—and why they are concerned about the diminishing of the Palestinian Christian community. One participant, the president of Auburn, said that Presbyterian involvement in Israel for 150 years is a blessing, because "We have skin in the game", but it is complicated, and we Jews and Christians need to learn to listen to each other. In that session, we also learned that, like the Jewish community, the evangelical community is not a monolith. That speaker urged us to go to an authentic place in our dialogue, not a convenient place: very important words of advice. Harvard's work on Difficult Conversations was cited; I was pleased that GLILA had brought in Sheila Heen to do some of that training. The panel also pointed to some generational issues. High schoolers and college students have a hard time relating to some of the issues and some of the history. Communicating that past and our passions—regardless of religious affiliation—is important to Israel's ongoing success. We heard similar things from Peter Beinart in the opening plenary—and his information that it is changing—as witnessed by having 500 college students attend this event.

Another session, on a Regional Approach for Peace, addressed the very current events in the Middle East and looked at what has happened over the past two months. Some of the panel, just back from Egypt, said that Israel was never mentioned in Tahir Square. The uprising was about freedom and dignity for Egyptians. Nevertheless, 2/3 of Egyptians are ready to accept a 2 state solution with the 1967 borders. Nonetheless, there is a "cold peace" between Israel and Egypt that cannot be taken for granted. Some on this panel thought that a bi-lateral track cannot deliver. It needs to be a multi-lateral track. Tom Dine countered and said that a multi-lateral track does not happen in one piece, but rather piece, by piece by piece, no pun intended. In his opinion, there needs to be an unofficial track. Israel was having negotiations with Syria, for instance, in 1995, 2000 and 2008. These need to continue, quietly, and possession of the Golan Heights, which feeds Syrian nationalism, needs to be resolved as part of it.

Perhaps most touching, was the session on Women in the Peace Process. Women can't be left out of the peace process and they were in the Oslo accords, leaving communities divided unnecessarily. The woman MK in the Kadima party, headed by Tsipi Livni, also a woman, said 30% of her party's MKs are women (also true for Lieberman's party). Women bring a different language to government, but on the foreign affairs committee she is one of only 4 women and the only one who did not serve in the military. "They are concerned about Iran. I worry about internal issues and the environmental threat to the whole region." The Palestinian woman business owner talked about the need to do more business, which requires more than microfinancing. "The political solution needs a viable solution through economic development, jobs and education. Business and jobs connect you to community. It gives you an ownership stake." This was the most hopeful session, about building bridges, one woman to one woman at a time. The session continued over lunch, but, unfortunately, because of a major rain storm and no

umbrella, I was unable to attend. I did enjoy a lovely lunch with a woman from the session who is writing an opera about the wall.

The Gala dinner event honoring leading human rights and peace activist Kathleen Peratis and featuring New Israel Fund President Naomi Chazan. Click here for founding J Street board member Kathleen Peratis' remarks, and click here for Naomi Chazan's remarks. Watch the full video here, which includes a surprise visit from a top American lawyer. Hint, she's on the Supreme Court! It was thrilling to see her in person—a hero of mine who has worked for peace and justice, for women's rights and human rights. While Naomi Chazan did an excellent job of summing up the conference in 5 bullet points (worth watching), it was delightful to watch the people at my table soaking it in. We were lucky to have MK Daniel Ben Simon and Representative Peter Welch at our table. They seemed to agree with most things being said from the "bimah". Ben Simon's message to my kids is "Enjoy life. The rest will follow." We also had the president of J Street U's national board. His youth, enthusiasm and understanding of the issues was impressive and gave me an additional source of hope.

I believe that success is what we have begun to achieve. Six hundred activists were on the Hill hosting over 200 congressional meetings. It is always thrilling to be on the Hill and to work with our congressional delegation to find a better way. They care about making the world a better place and look to their constituents to help them understand the issues. While I am not a foreign policy geek, I do care passionately. I was honored to be chosen to head one of the Massachusetts delegations. We went to three of our congressional offices, Rep. John Tierney, Rep. Niki Tsongas, and Rep. Richard Neal. Others visited Frank, Olmar, Markey, Brown and Kerry. We asked them to sign a "Dear Colleague" letter sponsored by Representatives Schakowsky and Eshoo, asking the president to take bold leadership and to continue the robust US foreign aid for both Israel and the Palestinian Authority. To my mind, cutting foreign aid to the region would unnecessarily destabilize it, costing needless lives. Another abiding Jewish value—shared by Muslims—is that to save one life is to have saved the world. I don't know that my day on the Hill directly saved a life, but I would like to think so. I am proud of my time in Washington, the courage to speak my values, and my connection with J Street which give me that forum.

J Street Panel: Iran's Nuclear Program is on the backburner but Israel Must Avoid "Rash Action"
By Eli Clifton
February 27, 2011
http://www.lobelog.com/j-street-panel-irans-nuclear-program-is-on-the-backburner-but-israel-must-avoid-rash-action/

J Street's annual conference hosted a panel discussion this morning on "Averting the Crisis: American Policy Options." The panel was notably missing the hawkish voice of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Patrick Clawson (who canceled earlier in the morning). The resulting panel largely reflected the realist view that a U.S. policy of discouraging Israel from engaging in any immediate military action against Hamas, Hezbollah, or Iran and the Obama administration's strategy of containment and engagement with Iran is advantageous for both U.S. and Israeli interests.

Some key quotes from the panel included Saban Center director Kenneth Pollack calling for the U.S. to hold Israel back from any "rush action" while the Middle East is in a state of turmoil:

This hasn't been about Israel. And the most important thing for the Israelis to do is to not make it about Israel. There are a lot of things that the government of Israel could do right now that would be extraordinarily unhelpful. Unhelpful to the events playing out in the region and ultimately unhelpful to the future and security of the state of Israel.

It would be driven by the fear, the siege mentality. It's one of our roles as the United States, and their great ally and friend, to help them through this period without taking rash action that will ultimately be to the detriment of Israel and the U.S. and to the benefit of Iran.

I think the Iranians would like nothing more than to see the Netanyahu government take a series of rash steps that would infuriate the Arab populations.

This theme — that hardliners in Iran, not to mention other Arab leaders facing citizen uprisings, will benefit from aggressive behavior on the part of Israel — was recurring during the panel's discussion.

Pollack also addressed the argument that democratic revolutions in the Middle East can be hijacked, saying:

We need to be alive to the possibility that these revolutions can come off the rail, that there are spoilers out there who look to take advantage of it. Iran is one that is unquestionably trying to do just that. What we have to do is make it hard for Iran to do it and help our allies in Israel not become spoilers themselves.

Heather Hurlburt, executive director of the National Security Network, added her own warning: that the U.S. must be careful not to fall victim to Islamophobic fear-mongering as popular democracy movements sweep across the Middle East.

You are seeing at every level people who conflate the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas and Al Qaeda as if they were all one thing whose primary purpose is to blow us up in our supermarkets. That is the rhetoric we're going to be confronting here in Washington.

The New York Times's Roger Cohen emphasized that the constant predictions that Iran is on the precipice of producing a nuclear weapon (with many of the deadlines already having passed) has been highly inaccurate:

We've had a lot of predictions that [Iran would be producing nuclear weapons] and the fact is it hasn't happened.
And

The Iranians have been messing around with this nuclear program for forty years! What are they doing?

The discussion about Iran tended to focus on what the democratic uprisings in Iran and elsewhere will mean for Israel and its fear of an Iranian nuclear weapon. The panelists admitted that Iran had lost its position on the front pages of newspapers and, as breaking news emerges from the Middle East on a daily basis, the Obama administration's focus on Iran's nuclear program will be diminished.

Pollack observed:

A lot of the people who previously spent all their time working on Iran, trying to craft these sanctions, trying to bring all these other countries aboard against Iran are now spending 24 or 25 hours a day doing nothing but working on Bahrain, Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, etc… Iran is very much on the backburner at the moment in the White House, the State Department and the Pentagon.

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Bibi Is On 'The Wrong Side of History' When He Opposes Arab Uprisings
By James M. Wall
March 6, 2011
http://www.salem-news.com/articles/march062011/arab-uprisings-jw.php

In the last few weeks Arab nations jumped from the wrong to the right side of history. And what a jump it was!

(CHICAGO) - Professor Fawaz A. Gerges explained why Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu tried to use his considerable political muscle in a failed effort to keep Hosni Mubarak in power. Gerges, who teaches Middle Eastern Politics and International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science, described the Arab uprising for BBC New Middle East:

Regionally, Israel is the biggest loser. It has put all its eggs into the basket of Arab dictators and autocrats, like Egypt's deposed Hosni Mubarak. Israel fought tooth and nail to support Mr Mubarak, who played a key role in tightening the siege of Gaza and the noose around Hamas's neck.

Few members of the US Congress would agree with Professor Gerges.

A large majority of the Congress sees nothing wrong with automatically approving an annual $3 billion contribution to the government of Israel, the responsible party to that "siege of Gaza". A recent debate in New York City's New School featured two Democratic Party antagonists on the Israel/Palestine issue: Brian Baird, the former Washington state congressman, and Brooklyn congressman Anthony Weiner.

Philip Weiss described the debate for *Mondoweiss:*

The conversation was deftly moderated by Roger Cohen of the *New York Times*, who was not afraid to call Weiner out when the congressman said there are no Israeli soldiers in the West Bank, or when he said that all the settlements are in Israel.
The chief response to the debate so far (besides the predictable at the *National Review*) has been shock at Anthony Weiner's contempt for international law and Palestinian humanity.
A politician who has distinguished himself on healthcare reform and economic justice issues in the US, resorts to "It's war, and war is hell" arguments when Baird, a clinical psychologist by training, describes the destruction of schools and innocent families and U.N. compounds by Israeli bombing, and the collective punishment of millions of people denied lentils, toothpaste, building materials, and the freedom to move beyond a territory less than the size of New York City.

Weiner's obvious lack of information about the West Bank and Gaza was in sharp contrast to Baird's informed passion over the issue. This wide gap between Weiner and Baird illustrates why there is such a desperate need in this country for Egyptian American journalist Mona Eltahawy.

Eltahawy is a columnist based in New York who writes for Canada's *Toronto Star*, Israel's *The Jerusalem Report* and Denmark's *Politiken*. Her opinion pieces have been published in *The Washington Post* and the *International Herald Tribune*.

Before moving to the U.S. in 2000, Eltahawy was a news reporter in the Middle East for many years, and worked in Cairo and Jerusalem as a Reuters correspondent. She has also reported for various media from Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Libya, Syria, Saudi Arabia and China.

Eltahawy was all over the media during the Egyptian uprising, on one occasion confronting Alan Dershowitz on CNN.

In an appearance with Amy Goodman on *Democracy Now*, Feb 1, Eltahawy talked about her conversation with Dershowitz, and about her effort to convince American media to stop calling the uprising in Egypt a "crisis". It was not a crisis, she pointed out. For Egyptians, it was an opportunity.

[video url: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZyMcvIIhyM&feature=player_embedded]

Two months before the Egyptian uprising the US Congress experienced its own major upheaval. Republicans took over the House while Democrats experienced a reduction in its control of the Senate.

Where Israel is concerned, parties don't matter much. Both Republicans and Democrats march to the drumbeat of the Israel Lobby. There were, however, a large number of new members elected in 2010.

Which explains why AIPAC was concerned about those Republican first-termers, many of them backed by the Tea Party. AIPAC knew that these tea partiers were extreme fiscal conservatives who were determined to attack the federal budget from top to bottom.

In a recent *Huffington Post* essay, MJ Rosenberg described how AIPAC dealt with the problem: Shortly after the election, AIPAC produced a letter for all those new Republican members to sign in which they pledged that, no matter what else they cut, Israel would be exempt. And almost immediately, 65 of the 87 Republican freshmen signed on. (More signed on later).

Among the signatories are some of the most vehement supporters of cutting virtually every domestic program. These are people who support cutting jobs in their own districts and proudly point to their devotion to the principle that shared sacrifice means everyone. But not Israel.

In its lockstep response to AIPAC, Congress appears incapable of grasping the full significance of the Arab uprising. They need to listen to Rashid Khalidi, who calls the uprising a "sea change".

In a recent Nation column, Khalidi, the Edward Said Professor of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia University, describes that "sea change" as a major shift in perceptions about Arabs, Muslims and Middle Easterners.

Suddenly, to be an Arab has become a good thing. People all over the Arab world feel a sense of pride in shaking off decades of cowed passivity under dictatorships that ruled with no deference to popular wishes... Before, when anything Muslim or Middle Eastern or Arab was reported on, it was almost always with a heavy negative connotation.

Now, during this Arab spring this has ceased to be the case. An area that was a byword for political stagnation is witnessing a rapid transformation that has caught the attention of the world.

Khalidi writes that this "sea change" shift in perception shows how superficial, and how false, were most Western media images of this region. Virtually all we heard about were the ubiquitous terrorists, the omnipresent bearded radicals and their veiled companions trying to impose Sharia and the corrupt, brutal despots who were the only option for control of such undesirables.

In US government-speak, faithfully repeated by the mainstream media, most of that corruption and brutality was airbrushed out through the use of mendacious terms like "moderates" (i.e., those who do and say what we want). That locution, and the one used to denigrate the people of the region, "the Arab street," should now be permanently retired.

Khalidi cautions us to be aware that this shift in perception of the region remains "very fragile" Even if all the Arab despots are overthrown, there is an enormous investment in the "us versus them" view of the region.

This includes not only entire bureaucratic empires engaged in fighting the "war on terror," not only the industries that supply this war and the battalions of contractors and consultants so generously rewarded for their services in it; it also includes a large ideological archipelago of faux expertise, with vast shoals of "terrorologists" deeply committed to propagating this caricature of the Middle East...

They are the ones who systematically taught Americans not to see the real Arab world: the unions, those with a commitment to the rule of law, the tech-savvy young people, the feminists, the artists and intellectuals, those with a reasonable knowledge of Western culture and values, the ordinary people who simply want decent opportunities and a voice in how they are governed. Khalidi concludes with this sober reminder:

Things could easily and very quickly change for the worse in the Arab world, and that could rapidly erode these tender new perceptions. Nothing has yet been resolved in any Arab country, not even in Tunisia or Egypt, where the despots are gone but a real transformation has barely begun.

Who in the region benefits from holding on to the false views of Arabs? First in a long line is the current government of the state of Israel and its many friends in America.

During the Egyptian uprising Israeli Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu put heavy pressure on the US to keep Hosni Muburak in power. Netanyahu instructed his supporters in the US Congress to warn President Obama that Mubarak's fall would lead to dire consequences for the region.

In an effort to break from the policies of the current right wing Israeli government, many liberals have rallied around the banner of J Street, the "pro Israel, pro peace" alternative to the Israel Lobby.

At this year's third annual Washington Conference, J Street attracted more than 2000 enthused participants who cheered speakers, some of whom were critical of Israel. However, right on cue, when the final conference statement was released, it cast its vote for an Israel determined to control the region by military power alone.

Just weeks after the start of the Arab uprising toward freedom and justice, J Street repeated the mantra: Nothing must be done to threaten that ten year guarantee of military aid from US taxpayers to Israel.

That guarantee comes from a Bush era contract that runs from 2007 to 2018, a total of $30 billion from the US to Israel, at $3 billion a year. That would be $3 billion a year from a US economy that is woefully cash-strapped.

Many of my liberal friends swear by J Street. They see it as the only hope for peace. I have to agree that J Street is an attractive alternative to AIPAC. Nevertheless, it advocates a militaristic alternative which in the present hopeful climate, is self-defeating.

The Egyptian-American journalist Mona Eltahawy rejects that militaristic alternative. The organizers of the J Street conference had to know of Eltahawy's passionate views about Middle East governments that exercise tight control over the Arab populations. So it is very much to J Street's credit that it gave Eltahawy a place on its program.

When Eltahawy laid out the history and the significance of the various uprisings by a new generation of Arabs she was greeted enthusiastically by the J Streeters.

[video url: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3U0QRR3ELxw&feature=player_embedded]

Finally, we move from the young prophetic voice of Mona Eltahawy to the wisdom of Israeli activist Uri Avnery, still going at 87, who began his March 5 column:

Of all the memorable phrases uttered by Barack Obama in the last two years, the one that stuck in my mind more than any other appeared in his historic speech in Cairo in the early days of his term. He warned the nations not to place themselves "on the wrong side of history."

It seems that the Arab nations took heed of this advice more than he might have anticipated. In the last few weeks they jumped from the wrong to the right side of history. And what a jump it was!

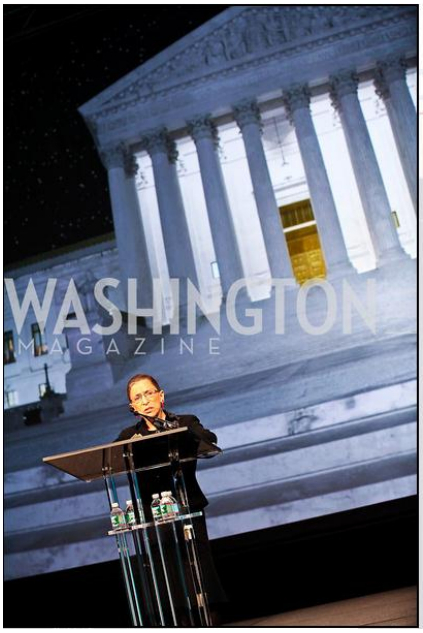
Journalism was Jim Wall's undergraduate college major at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia. He has earned two MA degrees, one from Emory, and one from the University of Chicago, both in religion. An ordained United Methodist clergy person; he and his wife, Mary Eleanor, are the parents of three sons, and the grandparents of four grandchildren. They live in Elmhurst, Illinois. Jim served for two years on active duty in the US Air Force, and three additional years in the USAF (inactive) reserve. While serving with the Alaskan Command, he reached the rank of first lieutenant. He has worked as a sports writer for both the *Atlanta Journal* and *Constitution*, was

editor of the United Methodist magazine, *Christian Advocate* for ten years, and editor and publisher of the *Christian Century* magazine for 27 years, starting in 1972. Time magazine wrote about the new editor, who arrived at the *Christian Century* determined to turn the magazine into a hard-hitting news publication. The inspiration for *Wall Writings* comes from that mindset and from many other sources that have influenced Jim's writings over the years, including politics, cinema, media, American culture, and the political struggles in the Middle East. Jim has made more than 20 trips to that region as a journalist, during which he covered such events as Anwar Sadat's 1977 trip to Jerusalem, and the 2006 Palestinian legislative election. He has interviewed, and written about, journalists, religious leaders, political leaders and private citizens in the region. You can write to Jim Wall at jameswall8@gmail.com. Visit Jim's Website: *Wall Writings*

Photos

J Street Gala Dinner
February 28, 2011
http://washingtonlife.smugmug.com/Category/J-Street-Gala-Dinner/16129078_sRWx8#1210976607_ZGVX7

Justice Ruth Bader, Kathleen Peratis. J Street Gala Dinner. Photo by Tony Powell. Convention Center. February 28, 2011


Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. J Street Gala Dinner. Photo by Tony Powell. Convention Center. February 28, 2011

Maryland Rep. Donna Edwards, Nancy Reynolds Bagley. J Street Gala Dinner. Photo by Tony Powell. Convention Center. February 28, 2011

Connecticut Rep. Chris Murphy. J Street Gala Dinner. Photo by Tony Powell. Convention Center. February 28, 2011

MAZON Founder Leonard Fein. J Street Gala Dinner. Photo by Tony Powell. Convention Center. February 28, 2011

Alexandra Stanton, Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown. J Street Gala Dinner. Photo by Tony Powell. Convention Center. February 28, 2011

Assorted Critics

The Washington Post

Morning Bits
By Jennifer Rubin
February 25, 2011
http://voices.washingtonpost.com/right-turn/2011/02/morning_bits_72.html

Awkward: Middle East adviser Dennis Ross is asked why he's going to a J Street conference with so many anti-Israel characters.

Ross's attendance is especially cringe-inducing in light of this: "Four Kadima MKs who accepted an invitation to speak at this weekend's J Street conference in Washington faced criticism on Wednesday from colleagues in their faction who said they should not be supporting the left-wing American lobby."

The Washington Post

Dennis Ross disappoints J Street
By Jennifer Rubin
February 28, 2011
http://voices.washingtonpost.com/right-turn/2011/02/dennis_ross_disappoints_j_stre.html

The administration's chief Middle East adviser Dennis Ross went to the J Street confab. It was an odd assignment, given that J Street, in concert with the pro-Iranian-regime NIAC had conspired to try to prevent his appointment. The applause greeting him was slight, almost imperceptible.

Ross in some clever ways communicated to J Street that its agenda and strategy are out of touch with reality. J Street perpetrates the myth that Israel, and specifically Israel's settlements, are the center of most if not all woes in the region. He, however, didn't mention "Israel" for the vast majority of his address and never referred to "settlements." Instead, he explained that the main issue in the Middle East is the toppling of autocratic regimes. He told the group that from "Algeria to Yemen" pressure is coming from the people of the Middle East. Using a term the left likes to apply to Israel's possession of the West Bank, Ross said that the old autocratic regimes are "unsustainable." Granted, his address was exceedingly dull and delivered in a monotone, but one couldn't ignore the utter silence -- indifference, perhaps -- when the topics of freedom, revolutionary change, and Muslim despots were discussed. And when he stressed the need for Muslim states to focus on internal reform without blaming Israel, the crowd, again, seemed not to notice or care that he was ridiculing J Street's own obsession with Israel and its settlements. (He, of course, tried some historical revisionism, explaining how the administration had been pressing Egypt for reforms from the beginning.)

When Ross did get around to Israel the bulk of his comments were about the U.S.-Israel military relationship. He declared that the administration's "fundamental principle is an unshakable commitment to Israel's security." Applause was tepid. (Not what this crowd paid to hear.) He asserted, "There has never been a time when the security relationship has been stronger. And that's a fact." Again, only very brief applause.

At the tail end of the speech, he finally got to the peace process, saying the "status quo was unsustainable." That got the crowd mildly excited, for now he might be getting around to their main goal -- hammering Israel. But alas, he declared, "There is no substitute for a negotiated peace." Dead silence. (You can see the thought bubbles: "Where does this guy think he is -- AIPAC?)

In his wind-up, he got around to Iran. He noted the "irony" of the regime taking credit for events in Egypt. (He muffed the line and instead said "taking credit for Iran.") And on Iran's nuclear program, he gave the Obama-approved squishy line, saying we are determined to try to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons.

With near-comic timing, the J Street host the immediately asked Ross whether it wasn't time for an American "initiative" (i.e. an imposed peace deal) to resolve the Palestinian conflict. As a trained diplomat, Ross resisted the urge to respond, "Weren't you listening?" Instead, he said the

administration is "working in a different direction" (as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton laid out in a speech in November), namely talking separately with the parties. He cautioned that the "preoccupation" of the region is the relationship between the "rulers and the ruled."

The host tried again, asking if it wasn't time to publicly make a proposal. Once more, Ross explained what the administration was doing (private, quiet talks). He was asked about the Palestinians' unilateral attempts to obtain recognition. Ross said firmly, "Unilateral moves are not going to produce an agreement." He said the U.N. was "not the forum" for these discussions. Dead silence.

Last year, the administration sent National Security Adviser James Jones to J Street. This year the representative was a step lower in the White House hierarchy. Moreover, he gave the crowd no fodder for its Israel-bashing and zero indication he shared its agenda.

I suppose next year the administration could send an intern (continuing the downward spiral of respect). But it's an election year, so the Obama team might wise up and send no one, for fear that the administration's decision to speak before a group infamous for its dishonest finances and enthralled with public bashing of Israel might undermine its own "pro-Israel" credentials. But, then again, J Street -- if it is still around -- might not want to have someone who is going to undermine, rather than parrot, its talking points.

THE JERUSALEM POST
Israel's best-selling English daily and most-read English website

J Street Exposes Itself
By Isi Leibler
February 24, 2011
http://blogs.jpost.com/content/j-street-exposes-itself

The scandals and controversies racking J Street over the past year are reflected in the notable absence this year of any high-profile Democratic Congressman at their annual conference, a marked contrast from the preceding year.

Obviously the political mainstream now has a better understanding of the organization. Claiming to be a "pro-Israel, pro-peace" organization, J Street vigorously set itself up as a body with the principal objective being to canvass the US government to exert pressure on Israel to make further unilateral concessions. It had the chutzpa to compare itself with parents obliged to impose "tough love" on drug addicted children.

J Street condemned Israel for "its disproportionate response" in the Gaza offensive against Hamas – highlighting that "we recognize that neither Israelis nor Palestinians have a monopoly of right or wrong."

It refused to condemn the Goldstone report and, to make matters worse senior officers of the organization actually facilitated meetings between Judge Goldstone and members of Congress.

J Street was challenged for having obtained donations from Arab and pro-Arab individuals and organizations. Over $800,000 came from an anonymous donor in Hong Kong, whose identity the J Street founder, Jeremy Ben Ami, refuses to disclose.

Until recently, Ben Ami had vigorously denied that his organization was receiving funds from George Soros, who is renowned for having proudly proclaimed "I am not a Zionist, nor am I a practicing Jew."

Yet, last September, the same Ben Ami was obliged to abjectly apologize to the public for having repeatedly lied, after it was disclosed that at least one third of their US budget had been donated by Soros. It was also subsequently disclosed that "The Middle East Lobby of J Street", a tax-exempt 501(c) 4 organization, had paid tens of thousands of dollars to a consulting firm co-owned by Jeremy Ben Ami, its founder and president. Ben Ami had initially claimed that he did not benefit financially, but had merely chosen the most qualified company.

There were other scandals throughout the year. J Street co-founder Daniel Levy wrote an article describing Israel's creation as, "an act that went wrong."

Barry Rubin disclosed that the head of J Street's office in Israel, Drew Cohen, was on record describing Operation Cast Lead as being an "unjust and even criminal act." He dismissed Gaza as a "mythic threat" to Israel and referred to the Gaza Flotilla confrontation as "a heinous

brutality."

But what tipped the edge and made an absolute mockery of J Street's pretension to be "pro-Israel,"was when it openly began urging its members to lobby the White House not to veto the most recent one-sided UN Security Council resolution condemning Israel.

This led Jewish lawmaker Gary Ackerman, a leading New York Democrat Congressman and former supporter of J Street, to express outrage that J Street's "decision to endorse the Palestinian and Arab effort to condemn Israel at the United Nations Security Council is not the choice of a friend trying to help. It is rather the befuddled choice of an organization so open-minded about what contributes support for Israel that its brains have fallen out.… I have come to the conclusion that J Street is not an organization with which I wish to be associated."

Thus, despite retaining its position as the darling of the left liberal and anti-Israeli media and continuing to receive funding from somewhat questionable sources, J Street has become marginalized.

Michael Oren, the Israeli ambassador to Washington, who had tentatively opened up a dialogue with the organization said, "J Street claim they're pro-Israel. They are calling for Israel to be condemned in the Security Council for the settlements and they are condemning some of our best friends on the Hill. So they can call themselves what they like." He refused to participate in the conference and instructed members of his Embassy to do likewise. Even Birthright canceled jointly sponsored visits to Israel with the organization.

Needless to say, with the organization quoting Ben Ami "doing whatever we can in Congress to act as [Barack Obama's] blocking back," the administration stood by the organization and Dennis Ross, the senior advisor to President Obama on Middle East issues, was directed to address the conference.

But this year's J Street conference will primarily be catering for far left activists, including some notoriously well-known anti-Israeli personalities.

This is exemplified by the award J Street will be giving to Sarah Beninga of the Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity Movement, whose manifesto calls for "liquidation or fundamental change of organizations that contribute to the dispossession of Arabs, including the Jewish Agency, the Jewish National Fund and the Israeli Land Authority."

The only disquieting note is that four Kadima and two Labor MKs decided to participate. It is a somewhat bizarre reflection on our political system, when a number of our mainstream MKs decide to participate in the conference of a group, which only a few days ago had been lobbying President Obama not to veto the UN Security Council resolution and which was boycotted by the Israeli embassy and even US Congressman who had participated in previous conferences.

Whereas Tzipi Livni, the leader of the opposition, who had on previous occasions criticized those condemning J Street, remained silent, to their credit several Kadima MKs condemned the participation of their colleagues. The former chairman of the Jewish Agency, Kadima MK Zeev

Bielsky, aptly commented that "it is too bad that some of my colleagues do not understand the danger of supporting an organization that is working against Israel."

The most disappointing participant is Nachman Shai, traditionally regarded as a mature and responsible opposition MK. He defended his involvement by stating that he disagreed with J Street policy. But he decided to participate because he felt there was a need to speak to young people with doubts about Israel rather than losing them and that the bulk of his address would concentrate on defending construction in Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem and settlement blocs outside the capital.

Shai is presumably well-intentioned, but he does not appreciate that he will be speaking primarily to hard liners with closed minds and that his very presence at such a conference provides it with an imprimatur and gives this group, consistently hostile to Israel, the respectability it desperately seeks but does not deserve.

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THE JERUSALEM POST
Israel's best-selling English daily and most-read English website

Our World: The West's proxy war against the Jews
By Caroline Glick
February 28, 2011
http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/Article.aspx?id=210244

By focusing attention on Israel and its crimes, Europeans, American admirers ignore Islamic war against Israel, global jihad.

It was a stunning moment of moral clarity. As the South Vietnamese refugees clambered onto rickety boats in the South China Sea to escape the victorious Communists, the American Left that orchestrated the US defeat through a sustained campaign of propaganda and fake calls for peace stood silent.

As Pol Pot, the "progressive" dictator tortured and murdered a third of his people in Cambodia, the leftists "peace" activists in the US and Europe who never saw a US military operation that was justified, turned a blind eye.

The silence of the likes of Susan Sontag, Jane Fonda, Noam Chomsky and their fellow travelers came to mind last week when the Western media and intellectual elites averted their gaze as Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, the long exiled spiritual guide of the Muslim Brotherhood spoke before a crowd of millions at Cairo's Tahrir Square.

Qaradawi, who had been living in exile in Qatar during Hosni Mubarak's reign, became an international jihadist superstar thanks to Qatar's unelected potentate Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani who gave him his jihad indoctrination show on Al Jazeera. From his internationally televised soapbox, Qaradawi regularly preaches international jihad and genocide of Jewry to millions of fans worldwide.

Two important things happened during Qaradawi's appearance in Cairo. First, his handlers refused to allow Google's Egyptian Internet revolutionary Wael Ghonim to join the cleric on the dais. For anyone willing to notice, Qaradawi's message in spurning Ghonim was indisputable. As far as the jihadists are concerned, Ghonim and his fellow Internet activists are the present day equivalent of Lenin's useful idiots.

They did their job of convincing credulous Western liberals that the overthrow of Mubarak was all about sweetness and light.

And now they are no longer needed.

The second message was Qaradawi's call to destroy Israel. With millions of adoring fans crying out "Amen," and "Allahu Akhbar," Qaradawi called for a Muslim conquest of Jerusalem – that

is, for the destruction of Israel. As a first step, he demanded that the Egyptian military open the Egyptian border with Gaza.

In the dismal tradition of its Vietnam-era teachers, today's international Left had nothing to say about Qaradawi's genocidal speech. In the New York Times' write-up of Qaradawi's triumphant return to Egypt for instance, the murder-inciting cleric was referred to as a champion of democracy and pluralism.

Leftist writers like Peter Beinart have spent the better part of the past month whitewashing and belittling the significance of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The same Muslim Brotherhood that was founded in 1928 and got its first boost from the Nazis who funded their anti-Jewish pogroms in Cairo and Alexandria in 1939 is seen as nothing to worry about. US President Barack Obama's Director of National Intelligence James Clapper assured Congress that the Muslim Brotherhood is largely secular. This is the same Muslim Brotherhood whose motto is, "Allah is our objective; the prophet is our leader; the Koran is our law; Jihad is our way; Dying in the path of Allah is our goal."

THE SAME Left who champions Qaradawi as a liberal is absolutely adamant that the revolutions now raging throughout the Muslim world are a mere sideshow to the region's chief drama. The revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan, Oman, Morocco and Saudi Arabia are nothing. And the anti-regime protests in Iran have no strategic significance whatsoever to the West, which is mortally threatened by the mullocracy.

Who cares if the Arabs are ruled by tyrants, democrats, jihadists, or fascists? The only thing that matters is that "Palestine" is free of Israeli "occupation."

How can anyone get excited about the future of the oil-dependent global economy when Jews still reside in Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria and Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem? The Left's essential indifference to the plight of hundreds of millions of Arabs and its significance for the West was exposed in a news analysis by Brendan O'Neill in The Australian on February 16. O'Neill noted that whereas the demonstrators in Cairo were fairly silent on the issue of the Palestinians, anti-Mubarak demonstrations throughout the West prominently featured anti-Israel slogans and chants of "Free, free Palestine!" O'Neill concluded that the contrasting messages, "reveals something important about the Palestine issue.... [It] has become less important for Arabs and of the utmost symbolic importance for Western radicals at exactly the same time."

Actually, it is important to Western leftists and jihadists, which is why the Palestinians only became a salient issue in Egypt after the Muslim Brotherhood began taking control over the opposition movement with Qaradawi's sermon on February 18.

IN A groundbreaking study of the propaganda war against Israel entitled "The Big Lie and the Media War against Israel: From Inversion of Truth to Inversion of Reality," published in Jewish Political Studies Review in March 2007, Joel Fishman showed that the Muslim Brotherhood's propaganda war against Israel, like the Left's propaganda war against Israel, relied heavily on

Nazi propaganda against Jews. The early partnership between the Brotherhood and the Nazis, brought together by Palestinian Arab leader and Nazi agent Haj Amin el Husseini imported European anti-Semitism to the Muslim world. Beginning in the early 1950s, Nazi war criminals immigrated to Egypt. There they recreated much of Josef Goebbels' anti-Semitic propaganda operation for Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Fishman also documented how in the aftermath of World War II, and particularly after Israel's victory in the Six Day War, the Soviets adapted Nazi anti-Jewish propaganda to demonize Israel as the new, collective Jew and in turn demonize the collective Jew as the new Nazi Germany.

Two sources fed the Soviet anti-Jewish/anti-Zionist propaganda machine: former Nazi propagandists in Egypt; and former Nazi propagandists employed by the East German Communist regime. According to Fishman, the messages developed by these ex-Nazi propagandists were the basis for the Soviet campaign to delegitimize Israel which began in earnest after 1967. The call to arms was published first in a Pravda editorial in October 1967.

There, Zionism, the Jewish national liberation movement was reviled as dedicated to "genocide, racism, treachery, aggression, and annexation...all characteristic attributes of fascists."

With both the Soviets and the Arabs spewing the same inverted message, it didn't take long for it to become the rage in Europe. Europe's adoption of the Nazi-inspired propaganda in which reality was inverted and Israel – the victim of Arab imperialist, genocidal aggression – became the imperialist, genocidal aggressor was facilitated by France's embrace of the Arab camp after its withdrawal from Algeria and effective withdrawal from NATO.

By 1975, with the UN General Assembly's adoption of the Soviet-Arab sponsored resolution 3379 defining Zionism as racism, most European governments had fallen in line with the Soviet-Arab propaganda war.

They in turn spent the next generation bringing their message to America.

TODAY, THAT message has become the sum total of Europe's Middle East policy. From their massive global funding of anti-Israel NGOs, to their financing of anti-Zionist films, plays, art exhibitions and educational curricula throughout the world and their bankrolling of the Palestinian Authority, the Europeans have put their money where their mouths and well-washed brains are.

As Norway's plan to run the Israeli embassy out of Oslo because its security measures annoy its neighbors; to European authorities' refusal to provide police protection for their threatened Jewish communities; to initiatives like the Dutch Parliament's current bid to outlaw Jewish ritual slaughter all make clear, hatred of Israel runs seamlessly into outright governmental aggression against Jews.

So too, as The Guardian's recent onslaught against the PA for its leaders' willingness to make minor compromises with Israel in the framework of a peace treaty demonstrates, mainstream

forces in Britain and throughout Europe now side openly with Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood in their annihilationist war against the Jewish state.

It is this obsessive campaign against Israel that explains the so-called Middle East Quartet's insistence that the most urgent item on the international agenda is coercing Israel to surrender land and rights to the PA.

Whereas the EU cannot figure out a coherent policy regarding Libya even as Muammar Gaddafi massacres his own citizens and sets fire to his oil fields, Europe's leaders are unified in their firm conviction that the so-called "peace process" must be reinvigorated.

So too, the Obama administration remains incapable of lifting a finger to prevent an Iranian proxy from taking over Bahrain or a consortium of al-Qaida terrorists from taking over Yemen. Obama refuses to take any action to help the Libyan people overthrow Gaddafi. As for Iran, Obama maintains his steadfast refusal to take any action to help the Iranian people overthrow their nuclear-proliferating, terror-supporting regime. But at the same time, the president and his advisors are absolutely committed to coercing Israel to block Jews from building homes in Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem and ensuring that everyone is clear that Jews have no legitimate right to our capital city and historic heartland.

As for the Left itself, as Ron Radosh reported in Pajamas Media this week, attendees at J Street's annual post-Zionist confab could barely muster polite applause for the mildly Zionist MKs from Kadima that spoke at the conference. But they broke into raucous applause when Arab and Jewish anti-Zionist speakers proclaimed that all progress in the region is tied to Israel ending its so-called "occupation."

AND THIS brings us back to 1975, to the boat people in the South China Sea, the killing fields in Cambodia, and the Left that couldn't care less about them. It could be argued that the Bill Ayres, Howard Zinns and Jean Paul Sartes of the world can be forgiven for their decision to side with the Soviets and their Third World proxies against the US and the Western alliance. After all, they had nothing personal at stake.

The Soviets were not threatening their freedom. And what did they owe to "unprogressive," "reactionary" people from Southeast Asia who agreed with America that Communism was evil and wished to be free? But the situation is different today. By waging its war against Israel through Palestinian proxies, the West threatens itself. The Nazi propaganda recycled by the Soviets which has enslaved the peoples of Europe and much of America's intellectual elite has not only turned them into willing participants in the new war against the Jews. It has turned them into instruments for their own destruction.

By focusing their attention entirely on Israel and its imaginary crimes, the Europeans and their American admirers ignore the fact that the Islamic war against Israel is itself a proxy war for global jihad.

That war, informed by the same Nazi propaganda, but refined through the prism of Islamic Jew hatred and totalitarian imperialism, does not see Israel's destruction as its ultimate aim. The

jihadists, whom the West so happily ignores and whitewashes, have made it absolutely clear that destroying Israel is but the first skirmish in their great war. Their ultimate aim is the conquest of what remains of Western civilization.

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THE HUFFINGTON POST

J Street's Wrong Turn
By Ira Chernus
February 23, 2011
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ira-chernus/j-streets-wrong-turn_b_827183.html

J Street, the most prominent American pro-Israel, pro-peace group, has packed its 2011 national conference with sessions on nearly every aspect of the Israel-Palestine conflict, U.S. Mideast policy, and American Jewish attitudes toward Israel. Conspicuously missing, though, is the most important topic of all: The narrative of Israel as a brave but insecure little nation, constantly forced to fight for survival. As long as that narrative frames American public conversation about Israel, nothing J Street or anyone else does to change U.S. policy will make much difference.

In Israel and Palestine, it's taken for granted that competing narratives play a central in keeping the political conflict going. But in the U.S., we are somehow blind to the role of narrative. So we get a J Street conference without a single session devoted to that absolutely crucial topic.

When I raised the point with a conference organizer, I was told that no separate session was needed because the issue "should be present throughout many of our conversations." It's like giving a course on how the human body works without devoting a class session to the bloodstream, because something about blood will probably come up in other classes.

The story of Israel as an innocent victim, constantly on guard against "existential threats," is the lifeblood of the right-wing pro-Israel lobby, which still has the upper hand in making U.S. policy despite the best efforts of J Street and others. As long that story holds sway, even Israel's most egregious acts will continue to be widely forgiven as unfortunate necessities. Though few Americans know the Hebrew mantras -- "ein breira" (there is no choice); "hacol bishvil bitachon" (all for the sake of security) -- most Americans take that underlying message for granted.

So Israel's occupation of the West Bank, its economic stranglehold on Gaza, its foot-dragging on peace-making, and the suffering that inflicts on Palestinians all get a pass from the U.S. public and policymakers because they sympathize with Israel's supposedly overriding need to protect its security.

Pro-peace groups spend little time promoting the obvious counter-narrative: Israel is by far the Middle East's strongest military power; no nation in the region has even the slightest chance of defeating Israel, as it has shown in every war since 1948; while we're bombarded with fears about a fantasy of a single Iranian nuclear weapon, Israel's 100 to 200 nukes are ignored; Palestinian violence against Israel has virtually ceased, since both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas are enforcing a nonviolent approach to the conflict.

Instead of hammering away at these obvious facts, the peace groups offer alternatives that will have little impact as long as the story of Israel's insecurity dominates the land.

J Street's preferred narrative is simple: As long as Israel occupies Palestinian land, Israel can be either a Jewish state or a democratic state but not both. But that view doesn't gain much traction with a public that makes national security a higher priority than democracy. If "the evildoers hate our freedoms," they'll wipe out those freedoms as soon as they get a chance; our first job is to make sure they never get that chance. That logic is a pillar of American political life.

It's only natural that it should be applied to our "endangered ally" Israel -- especially in the Jewish community. As long as most U.S. Jews credit Israeli claims of "existential threat" as realistic and reasonable, they'll continue to accept the argument that Israel can take no chances for peace. And as long as the American Jewish community tells that story, it will be hard to break its hold on the American gentile community.

So Obama, whatever his personal wishes, will find it politically too dangerous to do what J Street wants him to do: press both sides to define the border between the two states, and if they can't do it soon (which is likely) to present a U.S. map and demand a simple yes or no decision.

J Street's president Jeremy Ben-Ami has said publicly that Israelis' fear of unprovoked attack is the biggest obstacle to peace. What he doesn't say is that a similar fear for Israel's safety among U.S. Jews -- his main target audience -- is an equal obstacle to peace. Why won't J Street challenge the hegemonic Jewish narrative head on?

Staffers have told me privately that they don't want to risk closing down the lines of communication, and in some cases influence, they've opened up with the Jewish community and some members of Congress. Publicly, Ben-Ami now says that J Street will soften its critical tone: "We've come on slightly too edgy, too ready to hit away at people we don't agree with.

That rough edge hasn't been helpful." It's not likely, then, that his organization will risk whatever success it's enjoying by challenging the foundation of the American-Jewish narrative about Israel.

Groups to the left of J Street, like Jewish Voice for Peace and the U.S. Campaign to End the Occupation don't have the same political worries, so they're free to take a more aggressive approach. And they probably assume the narrative of Israeli insecurity is so absurd it's not worth mentioning; so they don't mention it. Instead, they work day and night educating the public about Israel's immoral violence and human rights abuses.

But the public already has a fair idea of the facts. They see it on TV. The problem is that so many don't define what they see as outrageous or abusive. What counts as a human rights abuse or moral outrage depends on the context. Suppose you strike out at someone who is menacing you or your child? Isn't that just self-defense? That's how most Americans see Israel's use of force and its human rights offenses.

This views prevails partly because it's repeated endlessly by top political leaders. When Barack Obama made his most famous statement on the Israel-Palestine issue, in Cairo, he started off with a full paragraph about the horrors of the Holocaust, proclaimed that "threatening Israel with destruction... is deeply wrong," and insisted that "Palestinians must abandon violence." He never said a word about the Israeli violence that has so decimated the Palestinian nation.

But the most powerful reinforcement of the Israeli insecurity narrative comes from the mass news media, who take it for granted as the frame for all their reporting on the Middle East.

Consider the reporting on the Egyptian upheaval in the *New York Times*. The *Times* offered a steady stream of stories from Israel in the days before Mubarak's fall, as if the impact on Israel were somehow of paramount importance. The gist of it all was a picture of Israelis "fearing that the more time passes the more the region is against them." "Anti-Israeli sentiment runs high in the neighboring countries." Israelis "believed that whoever followed Mr. Mubarak would be less friendly to Israel," and they "could be left without an ally in the region." So Mubarak's departure left Israel with "abiding worries about the future."

On the op-ed page, the *Times*' most influential writer, Thomas Friedman, reported from Cairo that the uprising "is not owned by, and was not inspired by, the Muslim Brotherhood. Most of all, it is not about some populist upsurge that craves restarting the war with Israel." He reaffirmed his call for the Israelis to make more concessions for peace. And, in a surprising about-face, he went even further than J Street in calling for President Obama to put forth his own peace plan now.

Yet Friedman prefaced all this by reaffirming the common wisdom: "This is a perilous time for Israel, and its anxiety is understandable." "Everyone can or should understand Israel's strategic concerns. They are totally valid... Of course Israelis are worried about convulsion here."

The *Times*' coverage offered a fine example of what Henry Siegman, former head of the American Jewish Committee, once decried (on the *Times*' own op-ed page) as widespread "pathological" fear about Israel's security. But the *Times* presented it all as straightforward factual reporting.

As long as pathological fear passes for fact, none of the arguments presented by J Street and other peace groups will make much of a dent in the American political scene, no matter how logical and well packaged they are.

It will remain too politically risky for the Obama administration to change the decades-old pattern: Though U.S. leaders do criticize specific Israeli policies and actions, when the chips are down the U.S. will side with Israel.

Before its next conference, J Street will have to make a choice. It can go on broadening its appeal in the Jewish community by avoiding a direct challenge to the insecurity narrative -- and see little, if any, progress toward its goal of serious U.S. pursuit of a two-state solution.

Or it can change direction and attack the insecurity narrative head on. That won't guarantee a shift in administration policy. But it will open up the possibility for J Street to do what Ben-Ami says he wants to do: replace the debilitating narrative of fear with a narrative of hope that is the only road to a lasting peace. And at least it will guarantee that we can have, for the first time, an honest and meaningful public debate about the Israel-Palestine conflict.

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Op-ed: Is J Street pro-peace?
By Jason Edelstein
February 27, 2011
http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4034916,00.html

J Street's embrace of fringe elements, BDS supporters exposes its true character

J Street, which prides itself as the "pro-Israel, pro-Peace" movement, has organized an annual conference that shatters the validity of this characterization. By hosting speakers like political activist Mustafa Barghouti, a leader in the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement, and Michael Sfard, who promotes lawfare cases against Israeli officials, J Street demonstrates that the term "pro-peace" no longer applies to the organization.

By opening its doors to "one-staters" and BDS activists, the organization has been left with no relevant identity and has disappointed individuals who wanted a strong, "center-left" voice on US-Israel-Palestinian relations.

A year and a half ago, J Street was in a different position. The October 2009 conference included center and center-left politicians and government officials. A total of 148 Members of Congress served on J Street's host committee and 44 members of Congress attended the Gala Dinner. General Jim Jones, President Obama's National Security Advisor, addressed the conference.

By Washington benchmarks, J Street was quickly achieving significant and mainstream influence. However, that conference also marked the beginning of political missteps and PR disasters, causing J Street to lose both momentum and key supporters.

In 2010, The Washington Times revealed that J street executive director Jeremy Ben-Ami lied about George Soros's three-year, $750,000 contribution. J Street also lied about its role in facilitating "meetings between members of Congress and South African Judge Richard Goldstone" to promote his report on the Gaza war. Notably, the report's conclusions about casualty claims in Gaza have been discredited.

Similarly, careful research has revealed the true nature of many J Street partners: Anti-peace, anti-two-states. In February 2010, J Street co-sponsored a congressional mission to Israel with Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP). CMEP's website features the "KAIROS Palestine Document," which explicitly promotes BDS against Israel, a movement whose leaders call for the elimination of Israel.

Later that year, J Street and J Street U organized a "number of events around the country featuring UNRWA's Gaza Director John Ging, who expressed support for flotillas to Gaza one week before the "Free Gaza" flotilla initiated a violent confrontation with the Israeli navy, resulting in nine deaths.

J Street's latest misstep – opposing an American veto of a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Israel – caused Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-New York) to disassociate himself from the organization and note that J Street it not "a smart, credible, politically active organization that is as aggressively pro-peace as it is pro-Israel."

De-legitimization fans welcome

Unfortunately, the 2011 conference speakers show who remains in J Street's tent. Mustafa Barghouti takes part in BDS activities, uses "apartheid" and "ethnic cleansing" rhetoric, and refers to "Israeli Bantustans" and "Ghettos." He also has proclaimed that "there's no use in meetings with Israelis and there is no peace partner in Israel."

Another speaker, Rebecca Vilkomerson of Jewish Voices for Peace (a misleading name in its own right), is actively involved in the BDS movement and vigorously defends the legitimacy of hate-filled, if not anti-Semitic, BDS campaigns. Vilkomerson also states that "Jewish Voice for Peace cannot be enthusiastic about US-brokered peace talks that actually perpetuate the occupation."

J Street's conference also will host Michael Sfard, the legal representative for Yesh Din, Breaking the Silence, and many other Israeli NGOs. Sfard promotes lawfare cases against Israeli officials, and has testified as a paid expert witness on behalf of the PLO in a lawsuit brought by victims of terror attacks perpetrated by the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. He also is a member of the "Support Committee" for the Russell Tribunal on Palestine, a mock court putting Israel and its allies "on trial." The framework, in keeping with the "Durban strategy," calls for "existing legal actions and campaigns in the context of BDS to be stepped up and widened within the EU and globally." Sfard also "testified" at this kangaroo court.

These speakers and their organizations engage in activities that work against peace and mutual understanding. More specifically, they participate and advocate in the de-legitimization campaign conceptualized at the 2001 Durban Conference. Ironically, J Street claims to oppose this campaign, but now provides a platform for its leaders.

J Street's conference is the manifestation of its trend towards these fringe positions, thus forcing out Rep. Ackerman and many others who shared his views on the US-Israel relationship. The conference has been relegated to a gathering of Jeremy Ben-Ami's NGO network, including New Israel Fund, where he served as communications director, and Yesh Din, with which he is closely associated.

J Street's tag line led with "pro-Israel," but was most identifiable with the "pro-peace" camp. J Street should reach out to members of Congress and others in the pro-Israel community and state that it no longer will build relationships and provide credibility to Israel's de-legitimizers. There is nothing wrong with being "pro-Israel, pro-Peace." J Street is neither.

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JewishJournal.com

J Street needs another lane
By David Suissa
March 1, 2011
http://www.jewishjournal.com/david_suissa/article/J_Street_needs_another_lane_20110301/

I was watching the J Street convention on its Web site, and it reminded me a little of those underground meetings among religious settlers in the West Bank. That is, a constant flow of red meat served to the fervent and the like-minded.

In the case of J Street, this red meat can be boiled down to this: It is really, really, really, really important that Israel reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians.

One fervent speaker after another came down from the mountaintop to convince an already convinced audience of how really important this goal is. Whether it was Peter Beinart fearing for Israel's democratic future, or Rabbi David Saperstein appealing to our highest Jewish values, or Sara Benninga finding her meaning in life by leading weekly demonstrations at Sheikh Jarrah, the theme was the same: Israel must make peace and end the occupation as soon as possible.

And who's the bad guy in all of this? Take a guess. With the J Street crowd, the underlying assumption is always that the major obstacle to peace is Israel. Palestinian obstacles to peace? They're as likely to be mentioned at a J Street convention as Avigdor Liberman is of being invited.

Sometimes I wonder what it must feel like after three days of one of these J Street smugfests. How do you go from feeling absolutely certain that you are right to feeling even more certain that you are right?

I remember when Rabbi Michael Lerner of Tikkun invited me to speak several years ago at one of its peace conventions in New York City. I was glad that he did, because it gave me a chance to ask a few hundred peaceniks a question they likely rarely hear: "When is the last time any of you woke up in the morning and asked yourself: 'What if I'm wrong?' "

No one raised their hand.

Yes, compassion is a great Jewish virtue, I told them, but so is humility. I confessed that, initially, I didn't believe in the Oslo peace process (because I didn't trust Arafat), but I asked myself, "What if I'm wrong?" and I ended up going along with it. So, I suggested, "What would happen if you all asked yourselves that same question?"

When I look at J Street now, I see some obviously good intentions ("We want peace!"), but not much humility. What comes across more than anything is an orgy of ideological self-confirmation toward pressuring Israel.

That's disappointing. I expect more from open-minded liberals who claim to care for the "other side." For one thing, I expect they would also care for the other side of an argument.

Have they studied, for example, the Palestinian Authority's global campaign to undermine and demonize Israel and the corrosive effect this has had on the peace process? As a "pro-Israel" group, what kind of public pressure have they brought to bear on the Palestinians to end their glorification of terror and indoctrination of Jew-hatred that has made so many Jews reluctant to take more risks for peace?

Where was their public campaign to pressure the Palestinians to return to the peace table during the first nine months of a 10-month Israeli settlement freeze the Obama administration lauded as "unprecedented"?

To balance their countless speakers who advocate putting more pressure on Israel, why haven't they included speakers like Itamar Marcus of Palestinian Media Watch, who has documented the continued anti-Semitic incitement in official Palestinian media, or an award-winning Mideast journalist like Khaled Abu Toameh, who makes a powerful case that the Palestinian Authority's primary interest is not to make peace with Israel — but to delegitimize the Jewish state?
If the goal is to bring together two sides, isn't it important to scrutinize both sides?

Why doesn't J Street bring in experts to explain the danger of Hamas taking over a Palestinian West Bank and pointing 10,000 rockets at Israel's nuclear installations, potentially creating a catastrophic meltdown in the Jewish state? Talk about fearing for a country's democratic character.

J Street's relentless focus on pressuring Israel isn't only unfair, it's also remarkably ineffective. A couple of years ago, Palestinian and Israeli leaders were negotiating directly as a matter of course. Now, in the face of the enormous and single-minded global pressure on Israel, Palestinians are negotiating in international forums on how best to demonize Israel. They won't even consider talking to Israel until it commits to freezing all construction in disputed territory, including, I presume, freezing any renovation of the restrooms at the Western Wall.

We've seen that the greater the pressure on Israel, the faster the cockier-than-ever Palestinians have run away from the peace table. J Street's reaction to all this is to bring 2,000 people together in Washington, D.C., to put even more pressure on Israel and urge the Obama administration to do the same.

In other words, after two years of generating bumper-to-bumper traffic on the failed road called "let's pressure Israel," J Street has decided that the best thing to do is to attract even more traffic to that road.

Maybe they ought to consider adding another lane to their congested highway and calling it "Let's pressure the Palestinians to stop undermining Israel and return immediately to the peace table."

In Los Angeles, we would call that the carpool lane.

Open? J-Street turns into cul-de-sac
By Emanuele Ottolenghi
March 3, 2011
http://www.thejc.com/comment-and-debate/analysis/46059/open-j-street-turns-cul-de-sac

Is J-Street"so open-minded about what constitutes support for Israel that its brains have fallen out"?

These are the words of Rep Gary Ackerman. Mr Ackerman was one of a handful of US Members of Congress who used to support J-Street. He reconsidered after J-Street sided against the US's recent veto of a UN resolution condemning Israel's settlements as illegal. It is one thing to criticise Israel on settlements, quite another to become complicit in the craven Palestinian strategy to force a solution on Israel through the anti-Israel UN.

Rep Ackerman threw J-Street to the dogs not because he joined the Likud but because enough was enough.

There has been a lot of controversy accompanying J-Street's entry into the Israel advocacy world. Two of the most egregious instances are its reluctance to disclose funding from George Soros and its role in helping Judge Richard Goldstone reach out to members of Congress after his biased report on the Gaza war was rejected by the US.

Regardless, J-Street has insisted that it is not just "pro-Israel and pro-peace" but also that, in contrast to its more hawkish opponents, it is open to different views.

In this passionate defence of a dovish worldview, J-Street closely resembles many mainstream leaders of the Jewish community in Britain, who have become more vocal lately about their discomfort with Israel and more willing than ever to make their support for Israel conditional upon the policies its government pursues.

And here lies the rub of this trans-atlantic Jewish argument for supporting Israel through "tough love".

In the programme for its conference this week, J-Street included - being 'open to debate' - an ardent advocate of the BDS campaign and a former Free Gaza Flotilla and one-state solution, anti-Oslo Palestinian activist.

Similarly, Jewish leaders in Britain have recently been pursuing a similar course by participating in debates alongside the new Jewish standard bearer of tough love, American commentator Peter

Beinart, and planning to travel to Ramallah to confer with PA officials. When criticised, they have protested that they have a right to do so because Israel's actions affect their daily lives.

You bet they do: how much more unpleasant it must be to stand alone at dinner parties because of your pro-Israel sympathies, compared to sending your kids to the army, living under constant threat of suicide terrorism and the shadow of Iran's budding nuclear programme.

Would it only were so. Criticising Israel is one thing. But giving succour to Israel's enemies and offering them a platform of legitimacy is quite another. Yet that is J-Street's consistent public record. Its only openness that one can detect is towards Israel's enemies on the left. Ambassador Dennis Ross's speech at J-Street was followed by a "debate" between New York Times columnist Roger Cohen, post-Zionist scholar Bernard Avishai and Daniel Levy.

Levy, a co-founder of J-Street, facilitated Judge Goldstone's visit to Congress and is on record as calling Israel's creation as "an act that was wrong". Avishai has long pedalled the notion that a Jewish state should be superseded and that Israel needs to be saved from itself. And Cohen famously downplayed Iran's extremism while deriding Israel's fear of Iran as paranoia in March 2009, before being mugged by reality during Iran's June 2009 elections.

That is the same degree of openness as exists at the top of the Jewish establishment in Britain - a complete unwillingness to take a pro-Israel stance that may rattle the cage of liberal group-think, lest one exposes oneself to accusations of dual loyalty.

J-Street is a sign of the times in the US. It reflects a shift in American Jewish views of Israel and poses a challenge to Israel, since it signals very strongly that even Israel's most natural constituency in the Western world is no longer there when Israel truly needs it. But it is also a sign of the moral bankruptcy of the dovish Jewish left in our diaspora: the intellectual inability to withstand the temptation to join the bandwagon of anti-Israel bashing, while hypocritically calling the move "tough love" and a sign of openness to diverse views.

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The J street conference: An "A" for effort, "F" for results
March 9, 2011
http://972mag.com/the-j-street-conference-an-a-for-effort-%e2%80%9cf%e2%80%9d-for-results/

From this Israeli's perspective, the J Street conference looked like a pretty sleek production. Too bad that's all it amounted to.

Now that the folks at JStreet are finished patting each other on the back for a job well done, I'd like to give them a perspective on the conference from one who did not attend. I just read about it here, on my laptop in sunny Bat Yam.

There wasn't much to see here. Not on TV, and not in the papers. I also understand that there wasn't much coverage in the American media. In fact, if one visits JStreet's website and clicks on the media coverage link, it's easy enough to compare the coverage received by this conference to the first one in 2009. Not only is the list about a third in length, but some big names don't show up: The New York Times, The Guardian, The Washington Times, The Economist, and others.

After seeing this, I decided to take a small, totally unscientific survey of numerous friends and family in the States, all liberal, Obama-voting Jews: none of them knew the conference was going on. My only solace was found in a cousin who told me the only info he had from the conference was +972.

Look, if you can't get an item in the NYTimes and if you can't get the attention of the audience you're preaching to (even though my poll was unscientific, my gut feeling is that it's not far from the truth) – your media department is having difficulties. This is basic stuff, folks.
But media is the least of JStreet's problems. What about what went on in the conference rooms? Sure, the speeches were nice. The two new mega stars that everybody just HAS to love these days – Mona Eltahaway and Peter Beinart – sent chills down many spines.

And, apparently, some of the panel discussions were very interesting. Take for example the groundbreaking panel on BDS – the fact that JStreet even opened that topic for debate is quite impressive.

But unfortunately, nice panels aren't enough. Don't get me wrong, creating discussion inside the Jewish community is extremely important, and I'm sure that's what happened at this conference. All in all, it looks like it was a feel-good, nice n' fuzzy kinda gathering. But a failure nonetheless.

Where JStreet failed this time is where it hurts most: the political aspect. Its most important arm is JStreetPac, the political action committee. The fruits of this pac's efforts should have been seen in the caliber of speakers from Congress it brought to the event. Based on the 50 or so

politicians who showed up, most of them minor league players, J Street supporters (myself included) should be worried. Even more so, when the best you can get from the Obama administration is a speech from Dennis Ross. I think it's safe to say that's even a downgrade from James Jones attending the 2009 conference.

Nathan Guttman of The Forward wrote about the possible reasons for this:
"Some members of Congress who participated in J Street's conference spoke of the difficulties of embracing J Street's agenda on Capitol Hill.

During one panel discussion, Rep. Keith Ellison, a Minnesota Democrat, said that "there are prices to pay" for supporting J Street's views in Congress. In another discussion, Rep. Lynn Woolsey, a California Democrat, argued that on Middle East issues the "most important decisions are governed by fear, fear of losing votes, of losing campaign donations."

And Natasha Mozgovaya pointed out how J Street is still a novice in some areas:

The problem with J Street is that it seems to have lost a bit of its policy focus, instead plunging into controversies and acting, as some Congress staffers hint, too hastily and even arrogantly. They point to the lobby's practice of putting out controversial statements without consulting enough with key players, making some congressmen sympathetic to a two-state solution feel uncomfortable.

J Street has got its work cut out for it. The organization must now roll up its sleeves in what will be its most difficult task: Ahead of the 2012 U.S. elections, it must prevent its next conference from being just as parve, since its arch-nemesis AIPAC will be doing some serious muscle flexing to keep its Senators and Representatives in rank.

In an emotional plea to participants of the conference, Eltahawy asked for J Street not to be 10 days too late, as were the Mideast leaders who eventually lost power. I fear Eltahawy's request is too late in itself. American Jewry, and J Street, seem to have woken up too late. It could be that by the time J Street gets its act together, the two state solution will be dead.

The only way to make a change is to get a massive movement of big gun politicians from AIPAC to J Street. And it has to happen soon, before the next conference.

2011 is J Street's make or break year. Otherwise, their next gatherings are in danger of turning into nothing more than annual pep rallies.

Occasional Religion

Fear and Loathing at the J-Street Conference: Negotiating between Protest and Boycott
By Shaul Magid
March 7, 2011
http://www.occasionalreligion.com/2011/03/fear-and-loathing-at-j-street.html

From February 27 through March 1 a group of more than 2,000 Jewish (and non-Jewish) leftists of various stripes met in a Washington D.C. conference center to hear panels on the Israeli occupation, American Middle East policy, reports from Israeli Parliamentarians, Israeli and Diaspora activists, and Washington insiders. As a member of the J-Street rabbinical advisory council I attended with anticipation. Last year's inaugural conference was exhilarating, and during the past year J-Street has raised a lot of money and grown into a formidable P.A.C. While not nearly as influential as the pro-Israel (and right-leaning) A.I.P.A.C (American Israel Political Action Committee) J-Street is now an inside-the-Beltway address when it comes to Middle East policy and Israel.

While last year's conference was about celebrating the success of J-Street's pro-Israel pro-Palestine agenda, this year's conference was more paranoid and more fraught with internal tension. J-Street has been under relentless attack from the American Jewish right. Ostensible centrists such as Alan Dershowitz have deemed them anti-Israel, and a poorly managed episode regarding a donation from George Soros was the cause of protest.

But the real tension was not from the outside but from within. J-Street is made up of three major constituencies: leftists and radicals inspired in the 1960s, twenty- and thirty-something progressives, and Washington pragmatists. The all-too-common split between the ideologues and the pragmatists was evident throughout the conference. The joke that floats around J-Street is that most of the members of J-Street are to the left of J-Street (AIPAC makes a similar accusation). Judging from the applause at the sessions or the chatter in the hallways, there is truth to the joke. Dennis Ross's banal talk about Obama's Middle East strategy was roundly criticized from the left by Bernard Avishai of the Hebrew University, Roger Cohen, op-ed writer for the NY Times, and Daniel Levy of the New America Foundation. Some of the most enthusiastic applause was heard in response to Mona Elthawy an Egyptian journalist whose criticism of Israel and the occupation was direct and uncompromising. Presentations by Israeli Parliamentarians (all from the "center" Kadima party and to the left) were politely acknowledged but there was no energy either in their words or the audience's response.

The white elephant in the living room was J-Street's position on the B.D.S. (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement. In almost every session I attended an audience member asked a question about B.D.S., and every time the question went unanswered. The single panel on J-Street and B.D.S. on the final afternoon was so packed that the conveners closed the doors and refused entry to about fifteen of us (the press was not permitted nor was the session video cast or taped). Twenty-something volunteers (all very polite) attempted to "herd" us into a session next door with U.S. Congressmen that was largely empty, but we argued with security guards until we were permitted to enter halfway through the session. It was the liveliest and most interesting session of the conference. Audience members protested when the session ended, so the chair,

Kathleen Peratis, reluctantly extended the session to allow for more questions.

B.D.S. is an umbrella organization that includes numerous anti-Israel groups bent on boycotting Israeli products and companies that do business with Israel as a non-violent method of putting pressure on Israel to end its forty-four year occupation on the West Bank. Some are against the very existence of the Jewish State, some are not. Some may be anti-Semitic, many are not. J-Street does not support B.D.S. nor does it support boycotting Israel as a constructive way of dealing with the situation. J-Street is committed to lobbying and thus must distance itself from positions that might alienate the "mainstream" (whatever and whoever that is). While this is understood and largely tolerated, the ideologues have become frustrated as they witness Obama consistently acquiescing to Benjamin Netanyahu's intransigence and the Israel government's unwillingness to act.

Israeli conference presenters such as Hagit Ofran of "Settlement Watch" and Michael Sfard, legal counsel for the far-left Israeli movement "Yesh Din" (there is law), all espoused opinions to the left of J-Street's official position. Gershom Gorenberg's excellent presentation argued that the settler movement is not only wrong but was undermining the entire Zionist project. They were received warmly. And throughout the conference, the weekly protests at Sheikh Jarrah and Bil'in were mentioned with pride. Sheikh Jarrah is a Palestinian neighborhood in Jerusalem where Israel has been evicting Palestinian families who cannot provide proper deeds to houses some have inhabited since the Mandate period. In their place, Israel is placing new immigrants, all Jewish. Bil'in is a Palestinian village where residents have been cut off from their farmland because of the "security" fence. "Breaking the Silence," a group of Israeli soldiers who have been documenting soldier's testimonies about the war in Gaza, was discussed in a positive light and Michael Sfard's refusal to serve in the territories while he was a soldier in the Israeli army was mentioned as part of his biography (and was roundly applauded). In short, protest in Israel is fine, but boycotting Israeli products, or products from the settlements, is not. And here is the rub. Why is a boycott not a legitimate form of non-violent protest for Jews who live in the Diaspora and cannot attend the weekly protest in Sheikh Jarrah? Why can we applaud brave Israelis and Arab moderates in Tayush, a group of Jews and Arabs who help protect Palestinians in the South Hebron Hills from settler violence, but not support a boycott of Israeli products in America? Why is supporting anti-government protest in Israel legitimate (even when in breach of Israeli law) and boycotting from afar rejected?

Setting aside alienating the "mainstream," a tack I find more an excuse than a policy, J-Street has not given its ideologically-driven constituents a sufficient answer. And they are justifiably becoming restless. If J-Street wants to be exclusively an inside-the-beltway lobby they needn't answer this question. But if they want to be a movement that represents the Jewish left in America on the question of Middle East policy they need to make a decision. Applauding non-violent protest inside Israel and discouraging non-violent protest (in the form of a boycott) outside Israel is not a consistent position. I went home feeling more confused than energized and unexpectedly thinking more about a boycott than before I boarded my flight to Washington.

[CORRECTED: A sentence has been removed that cited a J-Street decision to aid Judge Richard Goldstone in a trip to meet American lawmakers as contributing to the appearance of particularly leftist sentiments. We have since learned that event, reported in the Washington Times, was subsequently proven to be untrue. While the report still may have contributed to appearances, we prefer not to perpetuate false information.]

At J Street, the Values Are Clear, But the Voices Are Many
By Mark Donig
March 5, 2011
http://policymic.com/beta/global-affairs/j-street-values-are-clear-voices-are-many

Note: From Saturday, February 26th to Monday March 1st, J Street hosted a conference of over 2,300 people across Washington, DC about Israel-Palestine and the Middle East. J Street is a "pro-Israel, pro-peace movement" based in Washington, D.C. Contributing Writer Mark Donig attended the conference and wrote the following article based on his experience.

J Street's motto for this year's conference was "Giving Voice to Our Values." A more accurate motto would have put both nouns in the plural (i.e. "Giving Voices to Our Values"), which speaks to precisely the issue with which J Street continues to grapple as it attempts to broaden its base.

Ambassador Dennis Ross, who has served as a Middle East advisor to various presidents over the past several decades, served as keynote speaker for the conference's final day. During his speech, only about half the crowd cheered for Ross, a proudly pro-Israel Middle East expert who has taken part in events with the more mainstream pro-Israel lobby group AIPAC (judging by their Congressional support levels). A much greater portion of the crowd cheered in support of *New York Times* Op-Ed columnist Roger Cohen as he criticized Israel for its so-called "siege mentality," a kind of *damned if you do, damned if you don't* foreign policy outlook that Cohen and others attribute to Israel's supposed risk-averse, security-first conservatism. Yet, some in the audience sat silently during Cohen's comments (likely the same people who cheered for Ross).

There are divisions in J Street, and they are not inconsequential. While J Street purports to support only back-channel negotiations with Hamas, a panelist at one of the breakout sessions spoke to great applause when he advocated open negotiations with Gaza's leaders. While J Street hosted Dennis Ross as its keynote speaker, the audience gave perhaps the loudest cheer of the entire day to *Al Jazeera English* senior political analyst Marwan Bishara, when he animatedly stated: "It is disappointing that (J Street) would host Dennis Ross after 20 years of failure in the peace process." J Street's members are clearly divided from the organization's leadership.

J Street understands that there is both political space and popular demand for its existence, but also realizes that it needs to entrench itself in the Washington, D.C. mainstream in order to be impactful and knows that it has competition. As J Street begins to gain more members, it will be interesting to see if it can keep track of its many voices.

Commentary

Some Questions for Dennis Ross

By Alana Goodman

February 24, 2011
http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2011/02/24/some-questions-for-dennis-ross/

As Ambassador Dennis Ross prepares to speak at the upcoming J Street conference, he might want to think about addressing a few serious concerns during his speech. While Ross has certainly been a friend to Israel, some of the people he'll be sharing the spotlight with at the conference have not. Far from it — quite a few of them can't be characterized as anything other than outright enemies of the Jewish state. And so by lending his profile to the event, Ross is giving credence to the noxious ideas of his fellow conference speakers.

The Emergency Committee for Israel has outlined some of the troublesome statements made by other conference speakers in a letter it sent to Ross today. These include the claim that Israel is "a full-fledged Apartheid system," as Ross's fellow speaker Mustafa Barghouti alleges. Add to that the insistence, by Nadia Bilbassy-Charters, that Hamas shouldn't be "lumped in" with other terrorist groups. And Edina Lekovic's designation of Osama bin Laden as a "freedom fighter." Consider also the allegation, by James Zogby, that the IDF is waging a "Holocaust" against the Palestinian people. And the dangerous theory that Jewish members of the Bush administration were surreptitious agents of Israel, as advanced by Lawrence Wilkerson.

If all that isn't sufficient to dissuade Ross from attending the conference, how about the contention that Israel is illegitimate or that it must be boycotted or that its government officials and soldiers are war criminals, or any of the other delegitimization themes promoted by NGO leaders like Naomi Chazan, Rebecca Vilkomerson, and Oded Na'aman.

It can be assumed that Ross doesn't buy into these toxic claims. So why would he give them legitimacy by tying his name to this event? Will he address and reject them unequivocally during his speech? And is he prepared to deal with the consequences to his reputation if these sort of outlandish statements are made during the conference he's keynoting?

The Emergency Committee for Israel has rightly asked Ross to "seize this moment to explain why the Jewish State is not just one of our closest allies, but a country that fully deserves the admiration and moral support of all Americans." This type of vicious anti-Israel rhetoric can't be allowed to pass by unchallenged. And if Ross fails to address it, there's certainly nobody else speaking at the conference who will.

Commentary

Rep. Keith Ellison: 'There Are Prices to Pay' for Supporting Anti-Israel Policies in Congress

By Alana Goodman
February 28, 2011
http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2011/02/28/rep-keith-ellison-there-are-prices-to-pay-for-supporting-anti-israel-policies-in-congress/

Three years after J Street's formation, it's still politically toxic for members of Congress to support J Street's policies, said Rep. Keith Ellison during a panel discussion at the liberal lobbying group's conference.

Ellison, who co-chairs the House Progressive Caucus, said that fellow caucus members who took positions that aren't traditionally pro-Israel "found themselves primaried from the right on the issue of Israel."

"There are prices to pay," he added. "These folks who have impeccable pro Israel credentials found themselves in pretty tough primary races, and not just in one part of the country."

He also stressed that J Street needed to be more effective at protecting these members of Congress from attacks from groups like the Emergency Committee for Israel.

"J Street needs to continue to strengthen its muscles … so that a politician can take a position that is pro-Israel, pro-peace, pro-Palestinian … and not have to worry about [election-cycle attacks]," said Ellison.

During the 2010 midterm elections, J Street's critics argued that it's become politically harmful for members of Congress to align themselves with the lobbying group. J Street president Jeremy Ben-Ami seemed to reject this notion during a meeting with reporters today, saying that the group has made it much easier for politicians to take controversial positions on Israel. "The change in Congress is notable," he said. "The sense of openness on Capitol Hill is greater than three years ago."

But according to Ellison, the pressure to be pro-Israel is so intense that the House Progressive Caucus often avoids taking positions on Israel because its members are so concerned about being attacked by pro-Israel organizations. "We don't take them on because we can't come to a clear consensus on the question," said the congressman.

J Street was formed as an alternative lobby to AIPAC. But three years later, it's noteworthy that the group is still unable to influence many of the most progressive politicians on Capitol Hill.

Commentary

What Dennis Ross Said, and Didn't Say, at J Street
By Alana Goodman
February 28, 2011
http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2011/02/28/what-dennis-ross-said-and-didn%E2%80%99t-say-at-j-street/

Dennis Ross spoke at the J Street conference for 30 minutes this morning, and he spent most of that time trying to avoid any mention of Israel (a smart move). The first 20 minutes of his speech were about Egypt and the recent uprisings in the Middle East; the last five minutes of his speech were devoted to Iran's nuclear ambitions. And somewhere in between, he managed to squeeze in a few prosaic words about Israel.

The "status quo" in Israel is "unsustainable," said Ross,

much applause from the audience. He continued, saying that the only method for securing peace between the Israelis and Palestinians is "negotiation — there is no other." That statement elicited far less applause.

Ross then added that the claim by Arab autocrats that "there can be no reforms until there is peace" is simply an "excuse" — a comment that was met with conspicuous silence. Clearly, many in the audience still believe that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the reason for the oppression across the Muslim world.

Ross escaped immediately after his speech, leaving a panel made up of author Bernard Avishai, the New York Times's Roger Cohen, and the New America Foundation's Daniel Levy free to mock his address onstage.

"We need a little more Dr. Kissinger and a little less Dr. Phil," said Avishai about Ross, to enthusiastic applause.

It's now apparent why J Street called on President Obama to withhold its veto on the anti-Israel resolution at the UN Security Council — because, based on the sentiments of the audience, the majority of J Street's supporters won't accept anything less.

Commentary

J Streeters Continue to Bash Dennis Ross Speech
By Alana Goodman
February 28, 2011
http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2011/02/28/j-streeters-continue-to-bash-dennis-ross-speech/

Dennis Ross may have been the only notably mainstream pro-Israel speaker to attend the J Street conference, but the other attendees didn't exactly seem grateful for his participation. At a conference panel about engaging Hamas, one speaker had some pointed criticisms about the group's decision to appoint Dennis Ross as the keynote speaker. "It's disappointing that you would still host someone like Dennis Ross after 20 years of peace failure," said Marwan Bishara, a senior political analyst at Al Jazeera. His comment was met with an enthusiastic round of applause from the audience, suggesting that many conference-goers agreed with the sentiment.

In a meeting with reporters, I asked J Street president Jeremy Ben-Ami about the criticism, and he made it clear that his organization wasn't involved in the decision to invite Ross. "We asked the [Obama] administration for a speaker, and they chose Dennis Ross," he said.

Asked about Bishara's comments specifically, Ben-Ami called his complaint "ridiculous."

"We host plenty of people we don't agree with, and that's sort of ludicrous," said Ben-Ami, implying that J Street sees itself at odds with Ross on the issues.

But while Ben-Ami rejected Bishara's criticism of Ross, he also suggested that he wasn't pleased that Ross avoided addressing Israel issues in his speech.

But the fact is, Ross's views on Israel are undeniably different from the views held by many of the conference attendees. If his fairly broad speech about Middle East policy sparked such hostility, it seems likely that an address that focused more on Israel would have drawn even more ire from the crowd.

Obama-administration officials may be asking themselves why they bothered sending a representative at all, considering the chilly reception Ross received.

Commentary

Republicans a No-Show at J Street Gala
By Alana Goodman
March 2, 2011
http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2011/03/02/republicans-a-no-show-at-j-street-gala/

J Street doesn't like to describe itself as a "left-wing" organization, but its gala dinner last night failed to attract a single Republican member of Congress. The only two GOP lawmakers listed as attendees at the gala — Rep. Marsha Blackburn and Rep. Jeffrey Fortenberry — have both clarified today that they didn't actually go to the event.

The Washington Jewish Week's Adam Kredo published a list earlier today of 56 members of Congress who attended the J Street gala. Shortly after, Fortenberry's office called him to make it clear he had not been at the dinner or had RSVP'd.

"Soon after posting this list, Rep. Jeff Fortenberry's office called me up to clarify his inclusion. They say he neither RSVP'd for nor attended J Street's conference," wrote Kredo. "Amy Spitalnick, J Street's spokesperson, maintains that Fortenberry's office said he'd attend."

I contacted Blackburn's office and was also told by her communications director that she never showed up at the dinner. Spitalnick told me over e-mail that the list contained only the names of those who RSVP'd and that certain members were unable to make the event at the last minute.

J Street may not want to view itself as a group with partisan leanings, but when 100 percent of its dinner guests are Democratic members of Congress, what other conclusions can be drawn from that?

Commentary

J Street's Lobbying Days May Soon Be Over
By Alana Goodman
March 2, 2011
http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2011/03/02/j-street%E2%80%99s-lobbying-days-may-soon-be-over/

J Street was founded on the premise that it would be a left-wing lobby to rival AIPAC, but the biggest take-away from its second conference was that the group no longer seems to be pursuing that goal. While J Street has become something of an institution on the Jewish anti-Israel left, it appears to be embracing the identity of an activist group. Here are some of the indications that its days as a lobby are nearing an end:

1. Its relationship with the Obama administration is in a shambles:

The chilly relations between the Obama administration and J Street were perhaps the most notable part of the conference. Dennis Ross attended on behalf of the administration but barely mentioned Israel in his speech — a snub that did not go unnoticed by J Street staffers. The message to the group could not have been clearer: the administration was not interested in discussing J Street's issues.

But the antipathy went both ways. The atmosphere at the conference was perceptibly unfriendly to Ross, and other speakers criticized and ridiculed him openly after his speech. J Street president Jeremy Ben-Ami also repeatedly noted to reporters that Ross's attendance was the administration's decision, not the organization's.

2. The mainstream media have lost interest:

Of the journalists who showed up to cover the conference, many were left-wing reporters, students, or D.C. correspondents from Jewish publications. While J Street's conference last year was covered by the New York Times, the Guardian, the Economist, CNN, NPR, and UPI, none of these outlets appear to have written about the conference this year. In other words, J Street is still of interest to the Jewish community and to partisans, but not so much to the general public.

3. The makeup of the attendees has become limited to activists:

The crowd at the event was split between students and middle-age activist types. While AIPAC conferences tend to draw a lot of policy wonks, there were few suits walking around at J Street.

4. Its relationship with the Israeli Embassy is nonexistent:

It's tough to be an Israel-focused lobbying group without having a direct channel to the Israeli Embassy. J Street recently had a falling-out with the embassy, and no representatives were sent to the conference.

5. J Street is now embracing the controversy:

Instead of shying away from touchy issues like the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, J Street prominently featured a debate on the subject at the conference. Since many politicians may be hesitant to align themselves with an organization that gives credence to such a cause, this indicates that J Street isn't focused on being a persuasive lobby on the Hill.

J Street has a strong and recognizable brand and will likely continue as an activist group. In fact, it's already taken strides in that direction by focusing more on its campus organizations and regularly weighing in on current issues through press releases.

The truth is, J Street has had to grapple with its identity as an activist group and a lobby since its creation, and it was only a matter of time until one side won out. If the organization was aiming to be a successful lobby, it was going to have to moderate its message in order to have more of an appeal to lawmakers. Doing that, however, would have meant losing many of the members who wanted the group to be vocal in its criticism of Israel.

J Street boasted that it drew more attendees to its conference this year than it did in 2009. That's probably true. As the group moves further to the left, the left-wing community will continue to embrace it. And it will continue to morph into more of a "Peace Now" than an AIPAC.

Eurasia Review
News & Analysis

J Street And The Death Of Liberal Zionism
By Richard Silverstein
February 27, 2011
http://www.eurasiareview.com/opinion/opinion-opinion/j-street-and-the-death-of-liberal-zionism-27022011/

At first glance, it may appear downright curmudgeonly to speak ill of J Street as it triumphantly open its second annual conference. I attended its first conference in 2009 and hosted an unofficial progressive blogger panel there. Since then I've had a testy relationship with the group which has eventually led me to sever ties with it. One of my initial disagreements involved its decision to exclude Jewish Voice for Peace from the first conference. It also excluded Michael Lerner of Tikkun Magazine.

The second time around they've embraced some of the previously excluded in ways tentative or hearty depending on how closely they embody the liberal Zionist ethic the group represents.

New Israel Fund, Peace Now and Tikkun Magazine have each received their own panels to showcase their work. Jewish Voice for Peace, however, hasn't quite come in from the cold. Its director, Rebecca Vilkomerson, will participate in a BDS panel with three opponents of the concept. Jeremy Ben-Ami made some typically condescending comments to Washington Jewish Week in which he reassured mainstream Jews not to worry about Vilkomerson's views infecting the J Street body politic because merely hearing them at the conference would prove to listeners the error of JVP's ways:

Ben-Ami…said he is not concerned that the appearance of Vilkomerson might legitimize BDS. Rather, she was invited to air her views, he explained, so that conference attendees who might be "tempted" to embrace BDS will think otherwise after they see its moral and tactical failings exposed in debate.

This is the condescending, dismissive, litmus-test-driven J Street which drives me up a wall. The Israeli-Arab conflict should be beyond ideology. It should be beyond deciding for the parties how many states there should be.

I've reviewed the speakers and generally (with a few exceptions) I find the American speakers are standard issue liberal Zionist fare including figures like Dennis Ross, Peter Beinart, Gershom Gorenberg, Bernard Avishai, Ken Bob, Daniel Sokatch, Daniel Levy, and David Saperstein. But the Israelis are a different story. There are of course the typical Israeli pols, Knesset members who bring little to the table except the ability to flatter J Street that it is hobnobbing with the Israeli power structure.

But there are several young Israeli leaders of the Sheikh Jarrah movement who will speak, notably Assaf Sharon and Sara Benninga. Also, there is Daniel Seidemann of Ir Amim, Michael Sfard of Yesh Din, Jessica Montell of B'Tselem, Oded Naaman of Breaking the Silence. This

shows that J Street has at least recognized that they represent something vital is Israeli dissident politics. However, the group's leaders have over-romanticized the Israeli movement and freighted it with far too much significance. There is a tendency among the liberal Zionists to view Sheikh Jarrah as the Great White Hope for revival of an Israeli left. J Street is no exception. Note that it's titled the panel on which the Israelis will appear: The *Revival* of the Israeli Left. Sheikh Jarrah isn't the revival of the Israeli left. It is a successful political concept which most likely cannot be grown into a national movement because of its inherent limitations, which make it good at what it IS doing.

An added problem for J Street is that while the Sheikh Jarrah movement is just about the only bright spot on the Israeli left, it is decidedly not liberal Zionist. So what is left of the Israeli left may appear at this conference, but J Street will find that the Israelis are much closer in spirit and independence to Jewish Voice for Peace than J Street. What is exciting about Sheikh Jarrah is that it doesn't toe a party line. It doesn't call for an any state solution, one or two. It is a single issue group and that is it's power.

J Street has included precisely three Palestinians in its conference program (and two Palestinian-Americans). One of the former is Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, who tonight delivered his powerful words of faith and hope. But a Jewish peace group has to do better than including a smattering of Palestinian voices in its deliberations.

A number of people I like and respect like Matt Duss, Didi Remez and Mitchell Plitnick are either participating in the conference or blogging hopefully about it. While I continue to admire them I think ultimately they're wasting their breath. J Street is an empty shell. Yes, they run a good conference. But what are they when they're not running a conference? Where are they on the issues? All over the place. They were for Cast Lead till they were against it. They were for and against the Goldstone Report, a pretty neat trick. They were against Iran sanctions till they were for them. Jeremy Ben Ami wasn't taking George Soros' money till he was. They have an identity crisis.

Jeremy Ben Ami specializes in the old Clinton triangulation strategy. You tack straight down the middle between right and left. By doing so you gain the respect of the broad middle that eschews tags of extreme ideology or partisanship. But there's one big problem with this approach. There is no "broad middle" that remains in either the American Jewish community or Israel. There is the far right, which is dominant and the left which is largely quiescent. So by hewing to a middle road you essentially satisfy very few.

J Street is also a lobbying group that supports liberal Democrats who support Israel and peace. They contribute substantial funds to Congressional candidates. But frankly, I don't see this as being where the action in regarding either the Israeli-Arab conflict or even U.S. policy toward Israel, just as I see the Knesset as an irrelevant institution to political decision-making within Israel.

J Street is largely a cheering section for Obama administration policy in the Middle East. It is true that it lobbied against a veto of the latest UN Security Council resolution against settlements. But it lost that round. And one could argue that the abject failure of Obama's

strategy for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations has left J Street with no horse on which to bet. The group would have to stake out some independent ground since Obama has been shown to have nothing to offer.

Liberal Zionism is dead and J Street is liberal Zionism personified. It's like the Sean Penn character in *Dead Man Walking*. While it isn't precisely dead, it is close to being irrelevant. And in politics that's as good as dead. J Street abandoned us. It is too timid to represent real change or a hopeful message for the future. It waffles. It fudges. It performs ideological litmus tests to determine who's welcomed inside the tent. And anyone who believes it represents something vital or hopeful in the long-term is deluding him or herself.

While some may think I'm being overly harsh with J Street if they feel about it as I once did–that it represents a potential for something new in the American Jewish community. But the truth is that J Street will either eventually embrace ideas it currently labels anathema, or it will rapidly become irrelevant. Given what I've seen, I don't see it taking the kind of bold positions that are vital to encourage real change on the Israeli political scene. Israel needs tough love and Jeremy Ben Ami offers *parve*.

Emergency Committee for Israel Writes Dennis Ross Before Upcoming J Street Address
By Daniel Halper
February 24, 2011
http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/emergency-committee-israel-writes-dennis-ross-upcoming-j-street-address_552472.html

Emergency Committee for Israel executive director Noah Pollak has written a letter to Ambassador Dennis Ross, urging him to use his upcoming address to the liberal lobbying group J Street "to explain why the Jewish State is not just one of our closest allies, but a country that fully deserves the admiration and moral support of all Americans." If Ross does just this – express his support for Israel – he may not be received well, but "There are few moments when someone with [Ross's] experience and credibility is invited into the anti-Israel echo chamber and provided an opportunity to dispel myths, combat falsehoods, deliver much-needed moral clarity – and state clearly that the United States stands with Israel."

Pollak also notes the myriad anti-Israel speakers scheduled for J Street's conference, many of whom have called Israel an "Apartheid" state, accuse it regularly of war crimes, and support the Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. Here are just a few examples:

- **Edina Lekovic**, of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, who was a managing editor of a magazine that praised Osama bin Laden as a "freedom fighter."
- **Maen Areikat** of the PLO, who denies there was a Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and accuses Israel of "state terrorism."
- **Mustafa Barghouti**, a Palestinian leader who said that Israel has "a full-fledged Apartheid system" that is "much worse than what prevailed in South Africa," and that Israel has been "ethnically cleansing" Palestinians since 1948.
- **Jessica Montell**, executive director of B'Tselem, who says that "the situation in the West Bank is worse than apartheid in South Africa" and that Israel's policy toward Gaza is a "siege."
- **Rebecca Vilkomerson**, who runs the BDS group Jewish Voice for Peace. She has said, "Just as in Apartheid South Africa's day, Israel's society seems to be turning more bluntly racist and repressive." She says her organization "speaks out for Goldstone, and we speak out for BDS campaigners."

Quite a crew. Of course, J Street operates under the self-delusion that it's a "pro-Israel, pro-peace" lobby. If that's the case, why can't it bring moderate, mainstream people to its conference? Why does it instead provide a platform to some of the most deranged, hateful, and fringe critics of the Jewish State? J Street's conference makes it clear that it has failed in its original mission to become a "rival to AIPAC." Instead of trying to be influential, today it is merely being destructive. Maybe it should change its slogan from "pro-Israel, pro-peace" to simply, "the Delegitimization Lobby."

Here's the full text of Pollak's letter:

Dear Ambassador Ross:

You have devoted your career to helping Israel find peace with her neighbors. In high-level positions in administrations of both parties, you have been a leading presence in the peace process for over two decades. Because you possess such a detailed knowledge of the conflict and the attempts to resolve it, you are capable of distinguishing between truth and falsehood, helpful criticism and destructive activism.

It is thus with some surprise that I learned you would be speaking at this year's J Street conference. Speaking, that is, before a group that has worked diligently over the past three years to become a voice for weakening the U.S.-Israel alliance, for pressuring Israel to accept policies that Israeli voters have rejected as dangerous, and perhaps most important, for giving Jewish support to a global campaign of delegitimization directed against Israel and Zionism.

J Street has spent much of the last two years opposing sanctions on Iran while demanding that Israel refuse to consider military self-defense; it has partnered with leaders of the Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions movement; its inability to draw distinctions between Hamas and the IDF during the Gaza War was so striking that the president of the Union for Reform Judaism called the group "morally deficient" and "appallingly naïve." And, more recently, the group was exposed as having dissembled for years about its sources of funding (much of it foreign) and about its support for the Goldstone Report. Rep. Gary Ackerman recently ended his relationship with the group in exasperation, writing that J Street is "so open-minded about what constitutes support for Israel that its brains have fallen out."

The conference at which you will be speaking is titled "Giving Voice to Our Values." J Street's values are most clearly articulated by the speakers it has selected for its conference. These include:

- **Maen Areikat** of the PLO, who denies there was a Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and accuses Israel of "state terrorism."
- **Mustafa Barghouti**, a Palestinian leader who said that Israel has "a full-fledged Apartheid system" that is "much worse than what prevailed in South Africa," and that Israel has been "ethnically cleansing" Palestinians since 1948.
- **Nadia Bilbassy-Charters**, a correspondent for MBC TV, who says that Hamas should not be "lumped in" with other terrorist groups because "once Palestine is liberated then [Hamas] will cease to use violence."
- **Edina Lekovic**, of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, who was a managing editor of a magazine that praised Osama bin Laden as a "freedom fighter."
- **Imam Feisal Rauf**, the Ground Zero Mosque leader, who refuses to call Hamas and Hezbollah terrorist groups.
- **James Zogby**, president of the Arab-American Institute, who has compared Israelis to Nazis and accused the IDF of "genocide" and a "Holocaust." Only three months ago he wrote that "In a real sense, the plight of the Palestinians is to the Arabs, what the Holocaust is to Jews worldwide."

- **Lawrence Wilkerson**, a former State Department official, who has repeatedly accused Jewish members of the Bush administration of "working for Israel" and being "card-carrying members of the Likud Party," and asked whether "their primary allegiance was to their own country or to Israel."
- **Daniel Levy**, one of Richard Goldstone's leading advocates in Washington.
- **Jessica Montell**, executive director of B'Tselem, who says that "the situation in the West Bank is worse than apartheid in South Africa" and that Israel's policy toward Gaza is a "siege."
- **Naomi Chazan**, a leader of the New Israel Fund and a conference honoree. Her organization funds NGO's that accuse Israel of war crimes and Apartheid, provided the bulk of the accusations contained in the Goldstone Report, support the BDS (boycott, divestment, and sanctions) movement, and seek the end of Israel as a Jewish state.
- **Rebecca Vilkomerson**, who runs the BDS group Jewish Voice for Peace. She has said, "Just as in Apartheid South Africa's day, Israel's society seems to be turning more bluntly racist and repressive." She says her organization "speaks out for Goldstone, and we speak out for BDS campaigners."
- **Debra Delee**, president and CEO of the NGO Americans for Peace Now, who commented on the Turkish flotilla attack on IDF soldiers, "The root of this disaster lies not in the actions of the flotilla's participants."
- **Oded Na'aman**, a founder of Breaking the Silence, which accuses IDF soldiers of war crimes. He says the IDF "is guilty of a wide range of abuses" including "allowing Jewish settlers to poison Palestinian wells" and evacuating entire blocks of Palestinian towns and then demolishing them. Palestinian terrorism, he says, is merely a "perceived threat."
- **Daniel Seidemann**, founder of the NGO "Terrestrial Jerusalem," who claims that the Old City of Jerusalem is being turned into an "Evangelical settler theme park" and compared Israel's security fence to the Berlin wall.
- **Michael Sfard,** a lawyer for several radical NGO's, who routinely demonizes Israel, accuses it of "Apartheid," and promotes war crimes allegations against it. He testified as a paid witness on behalf of the PLO in a lawsuit brought in U.S. Federal Court by victims of terror attacks perpetrated by the Al Aksa Martyrs Brigades. He is best known as a leading advocate of "lawfare" – prosecuting Israeli soldiers and officials in European war-crimes trials.

Will you challenge those who seek to brand nearly every Israeli security measure a war crime? Will you take on the inventors and proponents of so many false claims about Israel? Will you repudiate the Goldstone Report?

The pro-Israel community – and the American people – have great respect for Israel because of her consistent willingness to seek peace with her neighbors, even as those neighbors have used the peace process as a means to continue to fight. The American people not only understand and sympathize with Israel's security challenges, but they refuse to be taken in by cynical and fraudulent accusations that aim to make it impossible for Israel to exercise her right to self-defense. Not only do they refuse to be fooled, they admire the Jewish State for the way it has created a vibrant and prosperous democracy while being subjected to constant terrorism, hatred, and incitement.

There are few moments when someone with your experience and credibility is invited into the anti-Israel echo chamber and provided an opportunity to dispel myths, combat falsehoods, deliver much-needed moral clarity – and state clearly that the United States stands with Israel. I trust that you will seize this moment to explain why the Jewish State is not just one of our closest allies, but a country that fully deserves the admiration and moral support of all Americans.

Yours sincerely,

Noah Pollak
Executive Director, Emergency Committee for Israel

Dennis Ross Offers No Praise to J Street
By Daniel Halper
March 4, 2011
http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/dennis-ross-offers-no-praise-j-street_552892.html

J Street's second annual conference – at least, that's what it was called until the organizers realized it had actually been two years since their first annual conference – took place this past weekend in Washington, D.C. For the liberal lobbying group, which proudly (and falsely) calls itself "pro-Israel" and "pro-peace," it's been a rough two years.

Let's review: It was revealed that, contrary to consistent claims from J Street's brass, left-wing financier George Soros had provided money to the group, amounting to approximately $800,000. Moreover, a mysterious foreign national donated about as much as Soros did to J Street. The woman's name: Consolacion Esdicul of Hong Kong. To date, her interest in J Street remains unknown. Neither Soros nor Esdicul were at J Street's conference this past weekend (unless they were incognito).

Stepping into the Washington Convention Center, one had the sense that things would be a little backwards. More women seemed to be wearing yarmulkes than men. And, when the plenary speaker Ambassador Dennis Ross spoke, the crowd clapped hardest not when he was offering platitudes to the country that it supposedly gathered to support, but he Ross insisted that the "status quo" in Israel is "unsustainable."

So when Ross said, "It is also important to reaffirm a fundamental principle of the Obama administration's policy toward the region: our unshakeable commitment to Israel's security," one barely heard applause. But when Ross exclaimed, "Despite the extraordinary budget difficulties facing our country, now is not the time to cut aid to Egypt," the crowd clapped hardest.

J Street, as it happens, is sponsoring a letter in Congress that essentially says that if the U.S. cuts foreign aid, it should also cut aid to Israel. But when it comes to Egypt, J Street is sure that America must not cut its aid.

Overall, however, Ross's speech was clever. He hardly touched on Israel, instead focusing on what's going on in her neighboring countries. And while most keynote speakers at policy conferences spend at least the first minute or two praising the host organization, Ross did not even try. Indeed, his only mention of the embattled lobbying group was to say, "When J Street began planning this conference, I'm sure you had in mind discussing a very different reality in the Middle East than exists today." That's not even faint praise – it's no praise at all.

the weekly Standard

J Street: Maybe 'Israel Really Ain't a Very Good Idea'
Obama's favorite Middle East lobby drops the mask.
By William Kristol
March 15, 2011

Lori Lowenthal Marcus, president of Z Street, has done some excellent reporting on the recent 2011 J Street conference in Washington. J Street, an invention of Obama allies, has been feted at the White House, and addressed by senior Obama administration officials. It's Obama's favorite Jewish group.

And here's a sample of the discussion at J Street's recent annual meeting, first reported by Marcus:

Daniel Levy, a founder of J Street: Look, bottom line: If we're all wrong, if we're all wrong and a collective Jewish presence in the Middle East can only survive by the sword, it cannot be accepted, it's not about what we do. Sound familiar? They hate us for what we are, not what we do. If that's true, then **Israel really ain't a very good idea**.
Marcus writes:

Are we there yet? Is this clear statement by one of J Street's founders -- that if the Arabs will force Israel to defend herself, then the Jews should abandon the Middle East -- enough to prove that J Street is not "pro-Israel" at all? Is this confession enough to enable (or force) people to see that it is this belief: that the Jews are simply wrong to defend themselves *ever*, including against Gazan terrorism or a nuclear Iran, that constitutes the foundation of J Street?

The context, of course, matters, and the context is even more damning. Marcus goes on:

Levy was discussing the US policy implications of the Middle East uprisings at a J Street conference prime time plenary session in the huge double ballroom of the Washington Convention Center. The other members of this panel included Bernard Avishai, who suggested, at 50:40, there should be an Obama Blueprint in which Obama organizes world opinion to pressure Israel into making real concessions to the Palestinians, and Roger Cohen, a New York Times columnist who seemed to suggest that it was the financial muscle of the nefarious Israel Lobby that forced the US to veto the recent United Nations Security Council Resolution condemning Israel. Cohen hoped Obama would extract a pound of Israeli flesh, or at least thousands of dunums, in exchange for that "favor." At 1:17:30.

President Obama has shown an amazing lack of concern for foreign policy in general—for America's standing in the world, for its traditional role as an advocate for freedom and democracy, and for its moral leadership in international institutions. But there is one thing he does seem to care deeply about: that Jews not build houses anywhere beyond the armistice lines

that were left in 1949 after Israel fought off numerous Arab armies that intended to destroy her at birth. This doesn't mean he agrees with Daniel Levy that "Maybe...Israel really ain't a good idea." It does mean that true friends of Israel need to keep a close eye on this J Street-friendly American administration.

PAJAMASMEDIA

Blaming Israel, Ignoring Radical Islam at J Street's National Conference
By Ron Radosh
February 27, 2011
http://pajamasmedia.com/ronradosh/2011/02/27/blaming-israel-ignoring-radical-islam-at-j-streets-national-conference/

The first session of J. Street's 2nd National Conference has just come to an end. The first plenary session, held at the Washington Convention Center, was attended by about 2000 delegates, many of them — at least 500 — young people from J Street chapters at different campuses across the country.

The main speaker was Rabbi David Saperstein, director and counsel of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. After his presentation, the organization honored three "heroes": journalist Peter Beinart, Israeli activist Sara Benninga, and Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, a physician whose three daughters lost their lives during the Gaza war in 2009.

Rabbi Saperstein began by laying out what he said was the main focus of J Street. There are two visions of America: that which sees the government as an enemy — a clear allusion to the Tea Party and Republicans — and that which sees the government as the agency which carries out the ethical needs of people who live in society. Peace, he argued, would arrive through those who lived true Jewish values: those of "social justice," which God required. One could not, the rabbi said, fulfill the destiny demanded by God and be holy, unless one fought for "justice, peace and equality." In other words, Saperstein was essentially arguing that to be Jewish, one has to be on the left or be a liberal. The reason Jews still exist as a people, he argued, was that they were called to help shape a better and more hopeful world, by feeding the hungry, speaking out against injustice, and working on behalf of a fair wage for working people. What any of this had to do with Israel might be a question those not in J Street are asking themselves.

Jews, he continued, have a thirst for social justice. They worked to develop standards for just war, and strive to use moral means when fighting a war. That means giving full rights to Israeli Arabs and working for a free and viable Palestinian state living alongside a Jewish state in peace. One could use the military in the short term to fight Israel's enemies, but, he warned, a military approach could not defeat terrorism.

He then made an assertion some would challenge. Israel, he said — ignoring the reality that terrorist attacks in Israel have declined tremendously since Israel built the security wall — had fewer attacks in the last few years of the Oslo Accords. The only way to achieve peace, he told the audience, was to make a real two-state solution take place. He said that both the U.S. and Israel had to have this as their policy, and Israel had to be pressured not to expand any of its settlements. American supporters of Israel, therefore, had to criticize policies of the Israeli government they felt were wrong, since that was in the best long-term interests of Israel itself. We could not be, he said, "idle bystanders of Israel's role." J Street, he told them to applause, was the single greatest contribution made by the American Jewish community in years.

After softening up the audience with constant praise of their group, Saperstein suddenly turned and presented a tactical criticism that did not go over well with the surprised audience. How, he asked, should we apply our values? How do we decide when to make tactical decisions that do not have great support in America's Jewish community? "When," he asked, "do we push the envelope?" Saperstein then let the audience know he was referring to the organization's recent decision to favor the recent UN resolution condemning Israel, which the Obama administration vetoed in the United Nations.

PAJAMASMEDIA

No Kosher food at Jewish J Street conference!
February 28, 2011
http://pajamasmedia.com/tatler/2011/02/28/no-kosher-food-at-jewish-j-street-conference/

The J Street national conference in Washington, D.C. has emphasized that they are pro-Israeli. Yet they didn't say anything about being pro-Jewish.

This morning **Jikileaks** reports that the J Street organizers at the Washington Convention Center are not offering Kosher food at its Jewish conclave with more than 2,000 participants. J Street boasts that hundreds of their attendees are rabbis.

The Jikileaks person on the ground at the J Street extravaganza explained his dilemma: "I arrived at the sandwich cart and requested the kosher option. I got a blank stare in return, and when I asked the manager she told me she had no idea what I was talking about. She hadn't heard anything about kosher sandwiches."

Kosher foods are those that prepared with strict rabbinic oversight. Observant Jews believe you are what you eat. It's pretty shocking that J Street was so indifferent toward their own Jewishness as to not offer any Kosher food options at its conference.

The lack of Kosher food does make sense. J Street's director once said his own staff was alienated from Judaism and once bragged to the **New York Times** that many instead prefer to conduct Buddhist Seders.

PAJAMASMEDIA

The J Street Conference: Where's the Outrage?
By P. David Hornik
March 8, 2011
http://pajamasmedia.com/blog/j-street-wheres-the-outrage/

Summing up last week's J Street conference, Uriel Heilman of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency writes that "by any measure, the massing of 2,400 people for a conference by a 3-year-old Jewish organization is a sign of notable success and an indication that in the future this pro-Israel, pro-peace lobby may have greater influence over U.S.-Israeli issues." If so, J Street and its director Jeremy Ben-Ami are worth continued scrutiny. As Heilman notes: "The detractors of J Street like to portray Ben-Ami as so far to the left of mainstream American Jewish opinion as to be out of bounds. If they think Ben-Ami is too much of a lefty on Israel, just wait til they meet J Street's rank and file."

Heilman goes on to convey some of the flavor of the conference. He quotes an "activist" who says J Street is "too kind to the Israelis" and "Obama's too soft on Israel." He notes that "many audience members applauded when a questioner on one panel asked why the United States doesn't impose economic sanctions on Israel."

"Ben-Ami," claims Heilman, "wasn't entirely comfortable with every speaker at the conference." And yet

Ben-Ami said J Street is committed to having an open conversation, including parties with which it disagrees.

That's why, he said, he invited Jewish Voice for Peace — an organization classified by the Anti-Defamation League as one of the top 10 anti-Israel groups in the United States, and which promotes the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement targeting Israel — even though, Ben-Ami says, he and J Street are against the BDS campaign.

These words — especially considering that Rebecca Vilkomerson, executive director of Jewish Voice for Peace, was one of the speakers at the conference — are worth pausing over. Here's some of what the ADL says about Jewish Voice for Peace:

JVP calls for an end to U.S. aid to Israel, accuses Israel of "apartheid" policies, and supports divestment campaigns against Israel. Like other Jewish anti-Zionist groups, JVP uses its Jewish identity to shield the anti-Israel movement from allegations of anti-Semitism and provide a greater degree of credibility to the anti-Israel movement.

In March-April 2010, leaders of JVP unsuccessfully lobbied for the passage of a divestment resolution at the University of California, Berkeley, targeting companies that do business with Israel.

I think I understand Jeremy Ben-Ami's method. Let's say I go back to the U.S. and organize a conference of Likud USA. I invite a group such as Kahane Chai — followers of the late rabbi Meir Kahane, who called for the expulsion of all Arabs from Israel — and grant its executive director the podium for a speech. Raised eyebrows? I explain that Likud USA is committed to having an open conversation, including parties with which it disagrees. The difference, of course, is that I wouldn't get away with it. The whole Jewish world, and not a little of the non-Jewish world, would be in an uproar. It would be said that Likud USA's — and even the Israeli Likud Party's — mask had been lifted, that those claiming all along it was really a radical-nationalist movement had been vindicated. There would be calls for new elections in Israel, and even for outlawing Likud as a racist party.

In other words, there are supposed to be groups — on both sides of the spectrum — that are considered too radical to be legitimate, to be part of the "conversation." A group, for instance, advocating the expulsion of all Arabs from Israel. And what of a group that "calls for an end to U.S. aid to Israel, accuses Israel of 'apartheid' policies, and supports divestment campaigns against Israel"?

Jeremy Ben-Ami says, if not in so many words, that such a group is legitimate. He claims he and J Street "disagree" with it — but he invites it to their conference as a full participant. There could be no clearer conferral of legitimacy.

What's most striking, though, is how many appear to agree with him. Members of Knesset from Israel's opposition Kadima and Labor parties attended the conference and spoke at it. So did Dennis Ross, chief Middle East adviser of the Obama administration. So did Rabbi David Saperstein of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. So did journalist Peter Beinart. So did Ron Pundak, director of the Peres Center for Peace in Israel. All these supposedly mainstream, left-of-center Israeli and Jewish figures were willing to share the podium with Rebecca Vilkomerson. And, for that matter, with Edina Lekovic of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, who — in the words of Noah Pollak in a letter to Ross before the conference — was a managing editor of a magazine that praised Osama bin Laden as a "freedom fighter"; or James Zogby of the Arab-American Institute, who "has compared Israelis to Nazis and accused the IDF of 'genocide' and a 'Holocaust'"; or Michael Sfard, a lawyer who "is best known as a leading advocate of 'lawfare' — prosecuting Israeli soldiers and officials in European war-crimes trials"; or about a dozen others of that ilk.

All part of the "conversation"? Something was on display at last week's J Street conference in Washington, and it was not pretty. Is opposition to Israel's worst slanderers and foes now a "right-wing" position? Those concerned about Israel, the U.S.-Israel relationship, and U.S. Middle East policy can look at this spectacle and draw their own conclusions.

P. David Hornik is a freelance writer and translator living in Beersheva. He blogs at http://pdavidhornik.typepad.com/

Israeli MKs to Attend Anti-Israel Conference in the U.S.
By Elad Benari
February 25, 2011
http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/142526

An upcoming conference in Washington by the leftist controversial American group J Street will not only feature anti-Israel speakers who for boycotts of the state, but will also feature Israeli MKs.

J Street defines itself as "pro-America, pro-Israel, pro-peace," and was formed as a left-wing lobbyist group to counter traditionally pro-Israel groups. It has repeatedly made claims against the state of Israel, and it has also been revealed that anti-Israel billionaire George Soros provides much of the organization's funding.

Detailed information regarding the scheduled speakers at the conference was provided to Arutz Sheva's Hebrew website by Journalist David Bedein, director of the Israel Resource News Agency and The Center for Near East Policy Research, who is currently in Washington for the conference.

"We know that the Ambassador from Switzerland will appear at the conference," said Bedein. "Switzerland is funding the event through the Geneva Initiative. There will be discussions within the conference on BDS."

Additional guests at the conference, noted Bedein, include U.S. top envoy Dennis Ross. "Ross is coming to the conference with the official blessing of the Obama Administration," he said. "There's also Ron Pundak who is representing the Peres Center for Peace, which is a star of the conference with several representatives on its behalf."

According to a Bedein, last month J Street conducted a conference in Jerusalem, during which it encouraged young adults who are soon to begin their service in the IDF to refuse orders if they are asked to serve in areas considered beyond the Green Line. "They [J Street] invited students who are about to be drafted and told them to disobey orders and even to defect from the IDF if and when they are called to serve beyond the Green Line," said Bedein.

He noted the name of another participant in the conference: Mustafa Barghouti, cousin of Palestinian Authority official Marwan Barghouti, who is currently in prison in Israel due to his involvement in many terrorist attacks in which innocent Israelis were killed.

"Mustafa Barghouti is in charge of spreading disinformation on behalf of the Arabs," said Bedein. "For years he has spread rumors that Israel deliberately kills children using tear gas and all sorts of other ways. He is the Palestinian Authority's representative at the conference. They are not bringing someone that is supposed to be a moderate, but rather this extreme person."

Bedein said that his organization will send a reporter to the conference who will ensure that the coverage is appropriate and will "ask all the right questions."

In regards to the fact that members of Israel's Knesset will take part in a conference which is so blatantly anti-Israel, Bedein said that he had approached the MKs who are planning to take part in the conference, including MK Daniel Ben Simon (Labor), Nachman Shai (Kadima), and Shlomo Mulla (Kadima), and asked them how their Zionist stance goes along with taking part in such a conferenece. He noted that Ben Simon responded by denying that J Street is anti-Israel, while Shai and Mulla did not respond at all.

He added that he believes that MKs taking part in such a conference should be considered crossing a red line.

"When you see that during this conference there will be a broad discussion on the boycott of Israel, when you see participants who clearly and blatantly support the Arab right of return and have expressed their regret that the state of Israel exists, when you see that UN officials who have criticized the very existence of Israel have been invited, this is crossing a red line," said Bedein.

Video: The Truth about J Street
By Elad Benari
March 1, 2011
http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/142587

In response to the Swiss-funded J Street conference being held this week in Washington, the Republican Jewish Coalition (a national grassroots organization of Jewish Republicans) has put out a video presenting the truth about the supposedly pro-Israel J Street organization.

The video is entitled 'The Mystery of J Street' and it deals with the question of how J Street can say that it is a pro-Israel group when it continuously comes out against Israel.

The proof of J Street being anti-Israel, says the video, is in the fact that the organization attacks Israel for defending itself against terrorists, that it backs candidates who do not support Israel, and that it lies about accepting donations from George Soros.

The video then presents the facts: J Street has endorsed and is actively raising money for the 'Gaza 54' (a group of Congress members who wrote a letter calling for Washington to pressure Israel to end the Gaza blockade, while Hamas terrorists were firing rockets from Gaza and hitting innocent Israeli civilians). It also notes that J Street was caught lying and that it has indeed received hundreds of thousands of dollars from Soros.

Another fact presented by the video is that J Street co-founder Daniel Levy has called Israel's creation "an act that was wrong."

All these facts mean that J Street is no friend of Israel and that it does not reflect Jewish values, concludes the video.

The conference, which is being held through Tuesday, is being attended by three Israeli members of Knesset, from Labor and Kadima. Other MK's refused the invitation. US Ambassador Daniel Oren refused a J Street invitation to a previous conference.

Journalist David Bedein, director of the Israel Resource News Agency and The Center for Near East Policy Research, told *Arutz Sheva* last week that he had asked the MKs who are planning to take part in the conference how their Zionist stance goes along with taking part in such a conference. He noted that MK Daniel Ben Simon (Labor) responded by denying that J Street is anti-Israel, while MKs Nachman Shai and Shlomo Mulla (Kadima) did not respond at all. "When you see that during this conference there will be a broad discussion on the boycott of Israel, when you see participants who clearly and blatantly support the Arab right of return and have expressed their regret that the state of Israel exists, when you see that UN officials who have criticized the very existence of Israel have been invited, this is crossing a red line," said Bedein.

J Street In Its Own Words
By Tzvi Ben Gedalyahu
March 7, 2011
http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/142727

J Street's annual conference this month unmasked its "pro-peace, pro-Israel" creed even in the eyes of liberals, and participants said on video that Hamas is no more a terrorist organization than the IDF" and that J Street should adopt the language of the "radical left."

[video url: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ll0_DVR8pXM&feature=player_embedded]

Its opening night ceremonies honored three people – columnist Peter Beinart, who has questioned the American Jewish community's liberal values in relation to Israel; an Israeli activist from the solidarity movement in Sheikh Jarrah, where Arabs have stoned and fought with Jews trying to live in their homes bought in the Jerusalem neighborhood; and a Gaza doctor who lost three children in the Operation Cast Lead counterterrorist campaign against Hamas terrorists.

An article in *Commentary* noted that "J Street's lobbying days may soon be over" because the lobby "has become something of an institution on the Jewish anti-Israel left."

Negative mainstream views of J Street's polices were indicated by Middle East specialist Dennis Ross' speech that barely mentioned Israel and the sparse media coverage, which was dominated by left-wing outlets.

The Israeli embassy did not send any representatives to the conference.

One American website noted that no kosher sandwiches were available at the conference.

WinnipegJewishReview.com

Inside View From Washington: Dennis Ross' S Speech And The J-Street Agenda: Is Obama Retreating From Peace Process?

By Rhonda Spivak

March 4, 2011

http://www.winnipegjewishreview.com/article_detail.cfm?id=858&sec=3&title=INSIDE_VIEW_FROM_WASHINGTON:_DENNIS_ROSS%E2%80%99_S_SPEECH_AND_THE_J-STREET_AGENDA:_IS_OBAMA_RETREATING_FROM__PEACE_PROCESS_

When PA representative was out of ear shot, Arab participants at J Street conference confirmed PA fears being overthrown by its people

By Rhonda Spivak, covering J-Street Conference in Washington, March 4

Dennis Ross's speech at J-Street was not what many J-street supporters hoped it would be. It was delivered without much enthusiasm. The American Jewish reporter sitting beside me said, "I've heard Dennis Ross speak many times- this is the worst speech I've heard him give." Ross was there to show that J-Street wasn't being ignored by the Obama administration, but I got the feeling he would have preferred to have been elsewhere.

J Streeters seemed to be taken aback that Ross didn't speak more about the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and focused mostly on Egypt, (reciting things that everyone already knew and explaining how well Obama had handled the situation). This left the impression that the Obama administration wasn't quite sure what to do in regards to the peace process, and if anything, was beginning to retreat form the process it first embraced with much eagerness.

Ross said "We will continue to press both sides to engage seriously in negotiations" – but there were really no details. In a session afterward, Marwan Bishara, a senior political analyst at Al Jazeera said "It's disappointing that you (J-Street) would still host someone like Dennis Ross after 20 years of peace failure," and he received tremendous applause from the J-Street crowd (showing just how left of centre the J Street crowd is).

In closing his speech, Ross mentioned the upheaval in Egypt and elsewhere in Bahrain etc first in summarizing the Administration's agenda "**We clearly have a full plate of challenges in the Middle East today. But our agenda is clear: help Egypt to conduct a successful, orderly, and credible transition; encourage others in the region to undertake meaningful reform now before they too face destabilizing unrest; continue the push for peace between Israelis, Palestinians…"**

Douglas Bloomfield in an article in the *Jerusalem Post* has written the "administration apparently sees the prospects as so bleak it is reluctant to risk any more political capital on active mediation as a difficult election year approaches, especially when so few in Congress appear inclined to back it." Bloomfield's assessment in my view is on the mark.

When Ross spoke of America's "unshakeable commitment to Israel's security" he received some applause from J-Streeters but the volume of applause was much louder when he said that "If Israel can view one lesson from the events in Egypt, it is the danger of getting stuck with an unsustainable status quo."

J-Streeters do not want the status quo: They want a Palestinian state and they want it now—they want a deal to be done by the September-October 2011 when they Palestinians are going to declare a state unilaterally (which the US will have to veto to prevent becoming a reality).

The J-Streeters are not terribly focused on what Israel's legitimate security requirements would be in an agreement. There were no sessions dicussing whether Israel needs a presence in the Jordan valley (in the very plausible event that hostile forces could attack it from Jordan, particularly if King Abdullah is overthrown and Jordan becomes ruled by its Palestinian majority, and is an outpost for Iran.) There was no focus on whether Israel needs to control airspace over the West Bank (to give it time to respond to an ariel attack without being wiped out). There were no sessions about a Palestinian state being de-militarized and how to accomplish this or if it is really possible. These are all session topics that could have been in the program if there were a more serious interest in Israel's legitimate security needs.

The main assumption of many of the sessions was that Abbas and the PA are ready for a peace agreement-but it is only Israel that is not. Political economist Bernard Avishai said as much as that after Dennis Ross's speech.

Avishai called on the had American government to offer a bridging proposal and a blue print of the American position and make it public and then run around the world having the Quartet, Germany's Merkal, and the UN endorse this so that pressure will build on Israel to accept it. (he assumes that the Palestinians would accept it, a highly dubious proposition in my view). In other words, more or less, Avishai and other J Streeters such as Ron Pundak of the Peres Centre for Peace (who told me he agrees with Avishai), are pushing, more or less, for an imposed American solution.

But, this is at odds with what the UN envoy Robert Serry said at the conference , which is that the Palestinian Authority fears the upheaval in Arab world will engulf the West Bank, an assessment that I share and have reported on previously. The PA establishment he said is worried that the youth will rise up against it. That is why Prime Minister Salam Fayyad is trying to co-opt Hamas, as Yasser Arafat did, to include it in the PA.

Serry also reportedly said that President Mahmoud Abbas has retreated to the Yasser Arafat position, minus the violence.(It is also worth remembering that the PLO's definition of illegal settlements includes the Jewish communities established since 1947, not 1967. This has never changed)

The real possibility of the PA being overthrown was something I heard from several Arabs participants at the J-Street convention. **However**, they said this only in private conversations after PA Ambassador Maen Areikat, Chief Representative of the PLO delegation to the U.S. had left the room.

At the conference I asked an Arab journalist I met why it was that right after the US vetoed the Palestinian UN resolution calling for a halt to the settlements, the PA had a rally in Ramallah against the US veto that only had 3000 people in it. Afterall, this ought to have been a rally that drew tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of West Bank Palestinians. The answer was what I expected : "The PA wouldn't have allowed the rally to have more people as they are afraid of being overthrown- (in other words the rally would in up being directed agaisn the corrupt PA leadership) In fact I suspect that the PA chose their own loyalists to be at the rally, including PA workers who depend on them for their bread and butter.

A Palestinian "insider" spoke with me about the possibility that the winds of change would serve to unseat the PA in the West Bank and/or Hamas in Gaza. (although I responded that I suspect Hamas would use all means at their disposal to prevent this and out of the two the PA is more vulnerable)

Another Palestinian at the conference told me that "I wouldn't vote for Abbas", but said he would support Marwan Barghouti (who is in Israeli jail serving time for his murder convictions) Barghouti he explained was in jail and hadn't lined his pockets as Abbas and his chronies had. He said "There is already a facebook page dedicated to ousting Abbas."

When Ron Pundak, director of the Peres Centre for Peace said in a session at the conference that that "if an election were held today, Abbas would win..we know it," I wondered if I had heard correctly. I think the opposite is more likely to be true—that if there were an election held today—Abbas would be sent home. In fact, a J-Street delegate questioned Pundak about his assumption.

The conference confirmed what I have written previously, that the PA could be swept out of power sooner than later, and when that happens I don't expect a moderate leadership to replace them---far from it. To see my previous articles on this click here:

UPHEAVAL IN PA AFTER EGYPT: DID ABBAS SACK EREKAT IN BID TO SAVE HIMSELF DID FAYYAD SACK HIS CABINET FOR SAME REASON
WILL UPHEAVAL IN EGYPT UNDERMINE ABBAS PALESTINIANS PROTEST IN RAMALLAH-SEE THE VIDEO

In short, the J-Street agenda does not appear to be compatible with the P-Street agenda.