

MEDIA CLIPS

Compiled for



on
October 27-29, 2009

by

Rabinowitz / Dorf
Communications

Media Message Events

Table of Contents

NEWSPAPERS AND WIRES

Israel Conference to Open Amid Controversy, <i>Washington Post</i>	5
Obama, J Street, and Middle East peace, <i>Reuters</i>	8
Who Speaks for American Jews? J Street Lobby Group Works to Loosen Big Beasts' Grip on Congress, <i>The Guardian</i>	10
AIPAC Rival 'J Street' Tied to Qatar, George Soros, <i>World Tribune</i>	15
1,500-strong J Street meet dubbed 'impressive' debut for new kid on the block, <i>Jerusalem Post</i>	
J Street's Campus Branch Drops Pro-Israel Slogan, <i>Jerusalem Post</i>	16
J Street student head: We're pro-Israel, <i>Jerusalem Post</i>	
J Street Absorbs Another Pro-Peace Group, <i>Jerusalem Post</i>	19
Oren Will Not Attend J Street Conference in D.C. Next Week, <i>HaAretz</i>	21
StandWithUs Takes Anti-J Street Stance, <i>HaAretz</i>	22
Poet Booted from J Street Meet for Comparing Guantanamo to Auschwitz, <i>HaAretz</i>	24
Why J Street Jeopardizes Jews, <i>Y Net News</i>	26
US: Leftist Jewish Camp Bolsters Grassroots Efforts, <i>Y Net News</i>	29
How Influential is Jewish Money?, <i>JTA</i>	30
J Street Leader Opens Confab with Plea for Discourse, <i>JTA</i>	32
J Street Conference Opens, <i>JTA</i>	34
J Street Absorbing Brit Tzedek Chapters, <i>JTA</i>	36
J Street and the Backlash from the Left, <i>JTA</i>	37
Livni Letter Backs J Street, <i>JTA</i>	39
Kerry Still Trying to Work Out J Street Appearance, <i>JTA</i>	40
J Street Nixes Poetry Session Over Speaker's Remarks, <i>JTA</i>	41
GOPer Drops Endorsement of J Street Event, <i>JTA</i>	42
Israeli Embassy: J Street Could 'Impair Israel's Interests', <i>JTA</i>	46
J Street Jitters Before Conference, <i>The Jewish Week</i>	47
J Street Exposed, <i>The Examiner</i>	49
J Street Lobby Represents a Pro-Peace Alternative to the Israeli Hawks, <i>The Examiner</i>	50
Jones Will Speak with Wexler at J Street Conference, <i>The Washington Independent</i>	52
J-Street Cancels Invite to Anti-Israel Speaker, <i>Israel National News</i>	53
Ambassador Oren Says No Thanks to J Street Invite, <i>Yeshiva World News</i>	54
Rips in the Peace Camp's Big Tent, <i>The Forward</i>	
J Street, Now a Player, Inches Toward the Center, <i>The Forward</i>	
J Street is an option worth investigating, <i>The Daily Star</i>	
'Pro-Israel,' my foot! J Street is an anti-Israel lobby, <i>Jerusalem Post</i>	
J Street's inaugural conference sees successes mix with awkward moments, <i>HaAretz</i>	
White House to J Street: We have your back, <i>JTA</i>	
J Street fills gap in Washington map, <i>BBC</i>	
Driving up J Street, <i>The Guardian</i>	
J Street's Ben-Ami: Our stance is like Kadima's, <i>Jerusalem Post</i>	
J Street Meet Draws Foreign Policy Heavyweights, <i>Inter Press Service</i>	
The Feel of Revolution, But the Hour Is Late, <i>The Forward</i>	
The J Street Challenge, <i>The Forward</i>	
J Street holds national confab; promises local presence, <i>The Jewish Chronicle</i>	

BLOGS

For Senate, Tasini Picks Up Some ‘J-Streeter’ Support, <i>NewsDay</i>	56
J Street’s College Arm Drops ‘Pro-Israel’ From Slogan, <i>US News</i>	57
Dropping the Pro-Israel Pretense, <i>The Weekly Standard</i>	58
Elie Wiesel Mocked at J Street Conference, <i>The Weekly Standard</i>	60
Livni Writes a Letter, <i>The Weekly Standard</i>	62
Another J Street Speaker Engages in “Use and Abuse of Holocaust Imagery, <i>The Weekly Standard</i>	63
A Dozen Pro-Israel Members of Congress Ditch J Street, <i>The Weekly Standard</i>	65
Ron Kampeas Pulls Out of J Street Conference, <i>The Weekly Standard</i>	67
Kerry and Oren Bail on J Street, <i>The Weekly Standard</i>	68
J Street Cans Anti-Israel Poetry Slam, <i>The Weekly Standard</i>	69
J Street: Pro-Goldstone, Anti-Israel, <i>The Weekly Standard</i>	70
Positioning J Street, <i>Politico</i>	72
Media Matters Back at J Street, <i>Politico</i>	73
Hey J-Street: Your Anti-Israel Bias is Showing, <i>American Thinker</i>	75
Advice for J Street, <i>The Atlantic</i>	77
J Street’s Ben-Ami On Zionism and Military Aid to Israel, <i>The Atlantic</i>	78
Talking J Street, <i>The Atlantic</i>	87
Anti-Zionists and the J Street Conference, <i>The Atlantic</i>	88
J Street Welcomes You, <i>Muzzle Watch</i>	90
Is J Street Changing Course?, <i>The American Conservative</i>	92
J Street: “We Are Winning”, <i>Foreign Policy</i>	94
Jewish Americans Turn Out in Droves for J Street, <i>True Slant</i>	96
Doing the Jones, or in which I get a little too deep into the weeds, <i>JTA’s Capital J</i> Pro-Israel, Pro-Peace, <i>Think Progress</i>	
Jones to J Street: I’ll be back, <i>JTA’s Capital J</i>	
J Street pushing a policy that leads to disappointment, <i>Crikey</i>	
J Street struts its stuff at first convention, <i>Jweekly.com</i>	

NEWSPAPERS AND WIRES

The Washington Post

Israel Conference to Open Amid Controversy

Liberal J Street's gathering sets off debate on U.S. relations

By Dan Eggen

Washington Post Staff Writer

October 25, 2009

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/24/AR2009102400994.html?hpid=moreheadlines)

[dyn/content/article/2009/10/24/AR2009102400994.html?hpid=moreheadlines](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/24/AR2009102400994.html?hpid=moreheadlines)

A Washington conference hosted this week by a new liberal Jewish advocacy group has sparked a diplomatic row and proxy battle over the Obama administration's stance on Israel at a time of simmering tensions between Washington and Israel's right-leaning government.

J Street, an advocacy and lobbying firm created 18 months ago, is holding its first annual conference beginning Sunday, with participation from about 150 Democratic members of Congress, many current and former Israeli politicians and U.S. national security adviser James L. Jones, who will be giving a keynote speech Tuesday.

But the self-described "pro-Israel, pro-peace" group has been rebuffed in its attempts to get Israel's U.S. ambassador, Michael Oren, to speak at the gathering. In a statement explaining the refusal, the Israeli Embassy accused J Street of endorsing policies that "could impair Israel's interests."

The organization also abruptly canceled plans for a "poetry slam" at the event after conservative activists and bloggers unearthed writings by two participants that compared the suffering of Holocaust victims to that of Palestinians in Israel's occupied territories. In addition, at least 10 members of Congress, including Republicans, canceled participation in the conference under pressure from conservative critics, according to J Street and legislative aides.

The skirmishing comes at a time of ongoing tensions between President Obama, who has vowed to restart Mideast peace talks by year's end, and the government of Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who has resisted U.S. demands to halt settlement construction in the West Bank and take other steps in advance of negotiations.

The furor also underscores unhappiness among some long-established Jewish groups that believe the Obama administration has snubbed their concerns about the Middle East conflict. The administration has made a point of meeting with a wide range of groups on the topic; Jones recently spoke to the American Task Force on Palestine, while Obama is scheduled to address the Jewish Federations of North America next month.

Tommy Vietor, an administration spokesman, said "the White House always welcomes the opportunity to discuss the president's views and engage in a dialogue with interested parties."

J Street was formed on the theory that existing U.S. Jewish groups, including the influential American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), lean too far to the right compared with the views of American Jews. J Street has garnered controversy for many of its positions, including opposing immediate sanctions on Iran and criticizing Israel's incursion into Gaza as "disproportionate."

J Street's executive director, Jeremy Ben-Ami, said many of the group's positions dovetail with those taken by Obama, who remains highly popular among Jews in the United States. He said the group has been the victim of "thuggish smears" by conservatives who favor more hawkish policies in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, and said he had hoped that Oren would have accepted an invitation to speak at the conference.

"I am extremely disappointed that this is the reaction of the government of Israel to an organization that is looking to expand the base of support in this country for Israel and is deeply concerned about its future," Ben-Ami said.

The conference and its scheduled participants set off criticism from conservatives such as Weekly Standard blogger Michael Goldfarb, a former adviser to the presidential campaign of Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.). Goldfarb referred to the conference as an "anti-Israel bash" and raised questions about the poetry event before it was canceled.

Some conservatives have also criticized J Street for accepting donations from individuals connected to organizations doing Palestinian and Iranian advocacy work. In addition, conservatives have attacked the conference for including Salam al-Marayati, founder of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, who apologized in 2001 for suggesting on a radio show that Israel should be considered a suspect in the Sept. 11 attacks.

StandWithUs, a Los Angeles-based Jewish advocacy group, has taken out newspaper ads this month criticizing J Street and faxed a "statement of concern" about the group to members of Congress listed as hosts of the conference. At least 10 lawmakers, including House Republican and likely senatorial candidate Michael N. Castle (Del.), dropped off the schedule amid the complaints.

Roberta Seid, research and education director for StandWithUs, said she views J Street as "outside the mainstream," and that broad support for Obama among American Jews does not mean agreement with the administration's Israel policy.

"American Jews seem to love Obama; American Jews are liberal," Seid said. "But they are much firmer in their support of Israel and opposed to viewing the conflict as equally Israel's fault. I think they draw the line there."

But Jon B. Alterman, director of the Middle East program at the centrist Center for Strategic and International Studies, said many critics are missing what the White House and State Department are attempting to achieve by addressing multiple groups in the Middle East conflict.

"I don't see this as the Obama administration choosing one approach or the other; I see the Obama administration as engaging broadly," said Alterman, who is scheduled to be a panelist at the J Street conference. "There's a broad effort to speak to diverse audiences about the president's level of engagement and his desire to move this process forward."

REUTERS

Obama, J Street, and Middle East peace

By Bernd Debusmann

(Bernd Debusmann is a Reuters columnist. The opinions expressed are his own)

October 30, 2009

<http://www.reuters.com/article/mediaNews/idUSLU62998220091030?pageNumber=2&virtualBrandChannel=0>

WASHINGTON, Oct 30 (Reuters) - Message to Israelis disgruntled with President Barack Obama's Middle East policies: you've got used to U.S. presidents pouring affection on you. Forget that. Obama is not "a lovey-dovey kind of guy".

That assessment came from an old Middle East hand, former U.S. ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk, in an exchange in the closing minutes of the inaugural national conference of J Street, a new pro-Israel lobby for the liberal majority of American Jews (78 percent voted for Obama) who do not feel represented by traditional pro-Israel advocacy groups, chief of them the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

The conference, in the words of J Street executive director Jeremy Ben-Ami, marked "the birth of a movement, a coming-out party for those who want to widen the tent and are not stuck in the mindset that because we are pro-Israel, we must be anti- somebody else".

Now director of the foreign policy program at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank, Indyk was on a panel entitled "Why Two States? Why Now?" He responded to a question from the audience on the advisability of American presidents getting personally involved in Middle East peace-making. They shouldn't get involved in procedural detail, he said, but for Obama it would be "really important" to go to Israel. Why?

His approval rating, according to Israeli polls, hovers around five percent, a sharp contrast to the 88 percent drawn by George W. Bush, a man thoroughly disliked almost everywhere else. The majority of Israelis think Obama is pro-Palestinian and see his visits to Egypt and Saudi Arabia as evidence that he wants to distance himself from Israel and curry favour with the Arabs. Unless he can dispel that public perception, the Israeli government is unlikely to make concessions.

Without major concessions, both from the Israelis and the Palestinians, there is no chance that Obama will succeed where other American presidents have failed. As far as concessions from Israel are concerned, J Street expects to help the Obama administration convince Congress that questioning Israeli policies is not tantamount to being anti-Israel.

Thanks largely to the enormous influence of AIPAC, which calls itself "America's pro-Israel lobby," criticism of Israel has been rare in Congress; debate of U.S. policies towards the largest recipient of U.S. economic and military aid even rarer. In a

controversial 2006 essay, two prominent political scientists, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, concluded that AIPAC had a "stranglehold" on Congress.

It's too early to tell whether this will change, now that there is another lobby that calls itself pro-Israel but does not shy away from questioning Israeli policies. J Street reacted to last December's Israeli attack on Gaza by criticising Hamas for raining rockets on Israeli civilians and Israel for punishing 1.5 million Gazans for the actions of extremists.

OUT OF TOUCH?

That stand drew furious responses both from the political right and the center. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the president of the Union of Reform Judaism, the largest Jewish religious organisation in America, called J Street's position "morally deficient" and "profoundly out of touch with Jewish sentiment".

On the right, the Gaza statement transformed J Street into an anti-Israeli, pro-Hamas organisation. One right-wing blogger called the group's conference, in the last week of October, an "anti-Israel hate fest".

(J Street, by the way, takes its name from a gap in the Washington street grid. There's an I Street and a K Street, home to most lobby firms in the capital, but no J Street. Missing street, missing voice).

Despite his disagreement with J Street over Gaza, Yoffie attended the conference and took part in a debate over what it means to be pro-Israel. There was agreement on a theme that ran through much of the meeting -- Jewish settlements in the heart of the West Bank make it impossible to establish a Palestinian state. Time is running out for a two-state solution. The alternative is worse.

That would be living together in one country in which Jews would be outnumbered (Palestinian birth rates are higher) and faced with the choice of abandoning democracy by exerting apartheid-style minority rule or giving up the idea of Israel as a homeland for all Jews.

The establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, a cornerstone of the Obama administration's Middle East policy, has been reluctantly embraced by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu but prospects look very bleak for soon resuming the peace talks that stalled last December.

Still, the mood at J Street was upbeat. One of the reasons: an attendance that convincingly ended arguments whether there was an appetite for a left-wing organisation that shuns the reflexive Israel-right-or-wrong attitude of the established lobbies.

"We planned for 1,000 delegates and when I first mentioned this figure, my staff thought I needed psychiatric treatment," Ben-Ami said. "We got 1,500." The under-estimate made for conference rooms so tightly packed that many delegates had to sit on floors and debates were frequently simulcast to spillover rooms.

A second reason for high spirits: Obama's decision to send his National Security Advisor, James Jones, to make the keynote speech. It broke no new ground but ended with a promise that the Obama administration would be represented at all future J Street conferences.

What better sign that the neophyte group has arrived as a serious participant in the foreign policy debate? (You can contact the author at Debusmann@reuters.com)

Who Speaks for America's Jews? J Street Lobby Group Works to Loosen Big Beasts' Grip on Congress

Boost for J Street as Obama adviser attends conference, but Israeli ambassador will be staying away

Chris McGreal

October 23, 2009

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/oct/23/j-street-america-israel-lobby>

Members of Congress signed up by the score when they were invited to this weekend's "pro-Israel" conference. But then the faxes and emails started to roll in, denouncing the organisers as "Jewish Stalinists", the "surrender lobby" and terrorist sympathisers.

Some members of Congress scuttled for cover, admitting they had little idea what the organisation behind the conference – an upstart Washington lobby group called J Street, which wants to turn US policy on Israel on its head – stands for.

But Washington is learning fast. J Street – the name plays on the first letter of Jew, and that many of the big Washington lobbying firms are on the city's K Street – was launched at the beginning of last year as a "pro-Israel and pro-peace" group, to general ridicule from the big beasts of the Israel lobby, which have kept a grip on Congress for decades.

They predicted that J Street and those who launched it – Jeremy Ben-Ami, a former domestic policy adviser to President Bill Clinton, and Daniel Levy, a former adviser to Israeli cabinet ministers and one of the authors of the Geneva peace initiative – would be swiftly marginalised as a niche group backed by obscure peaceniks with little influence.

But the organisation opens its first national conference in Washington tomorrow with a stamp of legitimacy from a White House that is clearly sympathetic to its view. General James Jones, Barack Obama's national security adviser and one of his point men on Israel, is to make a keynote speech. About 140 members of Congress have pledged their support, even after others backed away, and former Israeli cabinet ministers and generals will be in attendance.

But perhaps the best measure of its impact is the fury that has greeted the organisation's rise.

The Israeli ambassador has refused to attend the conference, while the traditional pro-Israel lobby has accused J Street of being "obsequious to terrorists and hostile to Israel" and a "disreputable pseudo-pro-Israel organisation".

"They're going hysterical," said Levy. "They said no one would want to hear what we have to say: that American Jews are fed up with being told we're for bombing Iraq and bombing Iran and we're against the hard concessions necessary for peace in Israel. Now they're trying to discredit us."

On the face of it, J Street stands for what the rest of the pro-Israel lobby stands for: peace, a two-state solution and a secure Israel. The very wide divide is over how to get there.

At the heart of the battle is who speaks for America's Jews and what it means to be pro-Israel.

For decades, groups from the Zionist Organisation of America to the powerful American Israel Public Affairs Committee (Aipac) have claimed to be the voice of the largest Jewish community outside Israel advocating unflinching support for the government in Jerusalem.

But in recent years, Aipac, the ZOA and other groups have drawn closer to the hard right in America, particularly the neocons and Christian evangelical organisations, as the conflict in Israel is framed largely in the context of terrorism while hardline governments pay little more than lip service to peace and a Palestinian state.

Levy says J Street was born out of a belief that many American Jews are now alienated from those who claim to speak in their name.

"A community that is very, very liberal, votes 78% Obama, overall a community that prides itself in the role it played historically in the US in advancing civil rights, was suddenly being identified with the most illiberal reactionary regressive policies advocated by groups that claimed to be doing this in the name of American Jewry and the name of Israel, making alliances with these dreadful people on the far-right of American politics," said Levy.

"What we had a hunch about, and was proven when J Street was launched, is that there is this very large constituency of Jewish Americans who do care about Israel and who are cool identifying themselves as pro-Israel. But their pro-Israelness is about the need for Israel to be at peace with its neighbours to gain security, not by being an ongoing expansionist presence. In fact, that endangers Israel."

J Street swiftly found followers – it claims 110,000 now – and funders. The organisation hoped to raise \$50,000 (£31,000) for campaign contributions to sympathetic candidates in last year's congressional elections. In fact it brought in \$600,000 in individual donations, which it directed to 41 candidates. Thirty-three of them won, although J Street is quick to acknowledge that its support was not decisive.

The organisation has brought in much more to fund its lobbying work, much of it five- and six-figure sums from Jewish philanthropists, although it has also been criticised for taking money from Muslims and Arabs.

For years Aipac successfully defined "pro-Israel" to Washington politicians as meaning unflinching support for whatever government sat in Jerusalem, and whatever its policies. The lobby group saw its core role as keeping the military aid flowing and ensuring that Washington did not force Israel's hand in ending the conflict with the Palestinians.

Aipac took the position that it was all very well for the US to offer the framework for negotiation and to mediate where necessary, but that the final agreement could only be reached by the two sides on the ground.

So when Obama laid down a marker to the Israeli prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, demanding a freeze on settlement construction, Aipac rounded up 70 members of the Senate to urge him to back off.

J Street has alarmed the Israeli government and its supporters in Washington by taking a very different tack. The group argues that if the two sides cannot reach a deal then the US should cajole Israel and the Palestinians towards an agreement, even if that means pressing the Jewish state to give up more than it wants.

Some J Street activists believe that is what Obama wants to do and they want to help him by building a constituency for action among sympathetic Jews across America.

That's a tall order, made all the more difficult by the resistance of vested interests targeted especially at discouraging members of Congress from dealings with J Street.

A barrage of attacks has been launched in recent weeks in conservative magazines, on influential blogs and by well-funded organisations across America.

One that has gained the widest attention has been led by Lenny Ben David, a former Israeli diplomat who for 25 years served on Aipac's staff, where his job was to dig out information to discredit Israel's critics.

In the Jerusalem Post, Ben David derided J Street as Obama's "toy Jews".

He has been digging into Ben-Ami's background in a PR firm that also dealt with Arab governments, and looking into some of J Street's funders, whom he describes as "Palestinians, Arab-Americans, and Iranian-Americans" – and therefore inherently anti-Israeli. Ben David has said that accepting donations from individuals with links to the Arab world or human rights organisations critical of Israel shows it to be against the Jewish state.

StandWithUS, a group set up to counter growing disillusionment with Israel among young Jews in the universities, distributed letters to members of Congress planning to attend the conference saying "J Street frequently endorses anti-Israel, anti-Jewish narratives" such as criticising the assault on Gaza. It also accused the organisation of demonising Jewish settlers in the occupied territories and said that some of J Street's funders had ties to Arab governments or Iran.

Some members of Congress, aware of the power of groups such as Aipac to mobilise against them, have had second thoughts and backed away.

Ben-Ami hit back in an email to supporters last week. "They're working the phones, calling the offices of every one of the 150-plus members of Congress ... to frighten them away from associating with J Street. The most infuriating part is that their thuggish smear tactics are having an impact – already five members of Congress have pulled off of our host committee," he wrote.

By the end of this week the number of withdrawals was closer to 15 and it is likely to rise further. Most are Republicans but some Democrats have backed away too, including New York's two Senate members, Charles Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand.

Senator John Kerry, the former presidential candidate and chair of the foreign affairs committee, has also pulled out of a major speech, although his office denies it is under pressure and says he will do his best to attend the conference at some point.

J Street was forced to pull a poetry session from its cultural programme amid uproar on rightwing blogs over the poet Josh Healey, who likened Guantánamo to Auschwitz and compared Israeli actions in Gaza to those of the Nazis.

Aipac officially denies that it has any role in the assault on J Street, but those at the forefront are close allies of the lobby group, from the conservative Weekly Standard magazine (once dubbed the "neocon bible") to the Zionist Organisation of America.

"If you look at this it's hard not to see this as a concerted, co-ordinated campaign," said Levy. "We know that's how the right wing works. There's a nexus of funders, there's a nexus of people who sit on each other's boards. They're all very close to Aipac."

The frenzy of denunciations almost certainly played a role in discouraging the Israeli ambassador, Michael Oren, from accepting an invitation to address the J Street conference, on the grounds that certain of the group's policies "could impair Israel's interests".

Oren, who recently gave up American citizenship in order to become the Israeli envoy, is sophisticated and well attuned to the American Jewish community and so it is thought likely that he would have seen the advantage in engaging with J Street. But the pressure for him to refuse the invitation was fierce and the decision was made easier by J Street's public stand with Obama against Netanyahu on the end to settlement construction.

At times J Street has misjudged the situation and drawn fire from its friends, most notably when it was seen as failing to distinguish between Israel's motives and those of Hamas in its criticism of the assault on Gaza this year.

That drew the wrath of one of America's most prominent liberal Jews, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, who called J Street "morally deficient, profoundly out of touch with Jewish sentiment and also appallingly naive".

Levy says the pressure won't work. "There are people in Israel who understand they've got a significant problem. Israel is alienating Jewish communities around the world," he said. "They risk losing young people, saying that Israel is not part of who I am.

"We're trying to say we can still embrace Israel, have a constructive critical dialogue to try and advance our vision of what Israel needs to be. And I think there are Israelis who are strategically far sighted enough to understand that if you alienate J Street you're setting Israel up for a huge problem."

Powerful voices

Much of the legislation that emerges from the US Congress is heavily influenced by lobby groups wielding huge budgets for campaign contributions and advertising that can be turned for or against a legislator. But money is not all that matters.

Possibly the most influential lobby group consists of retirees and their organisation, the American Association of Retired People, which has 30 million members who are more likely to vote than most Americans. Its voice has recently been heard on healthcare reform.

Religious groupings, particularly Christian evangelicals around the anti-abortion movement, hold considerable sway over politicians from some parts of America, as does the National Rifle Association, which works to limit gun control legislation by playing on fears that any new limitation on the right to carry weapons is a first step to a ban on all guns.

The NRA is particularly powerful in the south, where few political candidates dare to upset it.

Oil companies, trade unions, the aviation industry, drug manufacturers and the insurance industry all use money to considerable effect on Capitol Hill and in the White House.

On foreign affairs, there is no more powerful an organisation than the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (Aipac), which has locked most of Congress into unquestioning support for the Israeli government with few members willing to incur the wrath of a lobby that has proven able to destroy political careers.

Other groups have seen their influence wane in recent years, notably the anti-Castro Cubans in Florida.

1,500-strong J Street meet dubbed 'impressive' debut for new kid on the block

By Hilary Leila Krieger

October 30, 2009

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1256799046527&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

J Street wrapped up its first national conference with more than 700 activists pressing their congressmen on their agenda throughout the day Wednesday.

The effect that lobbying will have on US policy remains to be seen. But this week the 18-month-old, self-described "pro-Israel, pro-peace" organization made clear that it had emerged as a presence in Washington.

It held a coming-out party larger than the annual events of many other longstanding Jewish and Israel-oriented organizations. And despite criticism of the group from some segments of the Jewish community and some high-profile rejections and cancellations, the lobby still garnered the attendance of high-placed administration officials, dozens of members of Congress, international diplomats and overflowing numbers of activists clearly energized and excited by the to-do.

Perhaps the biggest seal of approval came from National Security Adviser James Jones, who not only praised the conference, but indicated it was here to stay.

"Congratulations on this great conference," he told a roaring crowd of 1,500. "You can be sure that this administration will be represented at all other future J Street conferences."

Jones wasn't the only major figure to address the audience of activists, politicians and policymakers. The capstone gala on Tuesday night featured a video address from King Abdullah of Jordan, who congratulated the group and backed its call for a two-state solution.

A Jordanian diplomat stressed to *The Jerusalem Post* that this message was the same as those Abdullah had delivered to other Jewish groups, and in keeping with his longstanding commitment to reaching out to the Jewish community. The official noted that Abdullah had participated in other organizations' conferences and met with Jewish leaders from a wide range of groups on trips to Washington.

But a European diplomat at the event who spoke to the *Post* was more pointed in his backing for this particular group. He said coming to the gala was important because "we want to show our support" for the group and its approach to the Middle East.

J Street has emphasized the importance of immediately reaching a two-state solution and its preference for diplomacy in resolving conflict. Some of its positions in favor of a settlement freeze and skeptical of Iran sanctions, among others, have put it at odds with the Israeli government. Israeli Ambassador to Washington Michael Oren turned down his invitation, with an embassy spokesman explaining that the organization took positions that could "impair" Israel's interests.

That response, according to some Capitol Hill observers, helped turn away some dozen of the 160 members of Congress who had originally lent their names to the gala's host committee. Some of the others who withdrew said it was because they hadn't realized their staff had signed them up.

Several conservative bloggers and other political allies also spoke out against the event, and Stand With Us sent a letter to members of Congress on the host committee, saying, "We are troubled because their [J Street's] positions seem to undermine Israel and its search for peace with security. Their views may also contribute to anti-Israel biases and misinformation."

In the face of those objections, 44 members showed up to the gala dinner, according to J Street.

And while one of the bigger-name speakers, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry, was a no-show, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman did attend the gala, and the dinner's keynote speaker, Chuck Hagel, went from being a former Republican senator to the new co-chair of the White House's Intelligence Advisory Board on Wednesday.

In addition, five members of Congress spoke at plenary sessions, and Florida Democratic Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz, who has a reputation for being a strong advocate for Israel on Capitol Hill, addressed participants at a closed-door VIP reception.

"Debbie Wasserman Schultz, I'm sure, wanted to help give some cover to the administration on J Street - by giving her *hecsher* [kosher certification], she helps relieve pressure on the White House for being so cozy with J Street," said one mainstream Jewish official of her participation, which raised some eyebrows given the debate in the Jewish community over the nature of the group.

Wasserman Schultz would not talk to the *Post* when approached at the conference.

Though the congressional lineup and 1,500 attendees was dwarfed by the annual American Israel Public Affairs Committee convention - which drew over half the 535 members of the House and Senate and 75 diplomats this year - it was a strong showing for the new kid on the block. "Impressive" was a common word on the lips of participants and observers.

J Street does not publicly describe itself as a counter to AIPAC, the established lobbying powerhouse on American policy toward Israel. But the leadership's emphasis on changing what it means to be pro-Israel and where American Jews are seen as standing on US-Israel policy is commonly viewed as a clear challenge to the decades-old AIPAC.

AIPAC itself seemed to avoid a direct showdown over the conference.

"I am very confident that AIPAC purposely did not send signals of any kind to Congressmen about signing up or not signing up for the J Street conference. AIPAC took a very low-key approach," said one Jewish organizational leader with ties on Capitol Hill, adding that if AIPAC had contacted members of Congress to ask that they not participate in the J Street conference, there was "no way" so many would have come or served on the host committee.

"AIPAC did not tell any member anything like that. Period," said one source close to AIPAC.

In at least one incident, though, people associated with AIPAC were among those who raised questions about JTA Washington reporter Ron Kampeas moderating a J Street panel which he was then pulled out of, according to individuals familiar with the situation.

"I don't know what reasons JTA had for their decision," the source said. "But I don't doubt that many people would have found it odd if a reporter would be moderating a panel at a conference they were covering."

Kampeas, who was to have moderated a discussion on what it meant to be pro-Israel, referred all questions on the issue to JTA editor Ami Eden.

Eden explained that "the main factor in my decision was not the concerns I may or may not have heard from other organizations, but concerns I heard from people very close to JTA who are not motivated by ideology but by concern for JTA's credibility in all sectors of the Jewish community."

He added that his decision was based on external perceptions and was not in any way about Kampeas's ability to be an impartial reporter, and that it should not be seen as a JTA statement of support or criticism of J Street.

Eden noted that coverage of J Street had provoked a number of "questions and concerns" from readers, much of it about the amount of attention it received.

And indeed, members of Congress who did refer to having been pressured not to attend pointed to a range of people who had expressed concern.

Illinois Democratic Representative Jan Schakowsky said that most of the calls had been telling her that "what's good for me" was to skip the conference, where she participated in a plenary panel.

But she told the *Post* that she thought it was important to encourage differences of perspective in Washington and that J Street was one such new avenue for doing so.

"Sometimes there are differences of opinion or differences in strategy, but I don't think drawing a bright line that says you're on one side or the other is helpful for the Jewish community or members of Congress," she said.

J Street Campus Branch Drops Pro-Israel Slogan

By Hilary Leila Krieger

JPost Correspondent in Washington

October 27, 2009

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1256557968276&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

J Street's university arm has dropped the "pro-Israel" part of the left-wing US lobby's "pro-Israel, pro-peace" slogan to avoid alienating students.

That decision was part of the message conveyed to young activists who attended a special weekend program for students ahead of J Street's first annual conference, which began on Sunday.

Students are seen as a key component of the 18-month-old organization's constituency base and the conference itself. The multi-day event has incorporated new technology and interactive forums to harness their energy and garner feedback from the audience, which swelled to 1,500 on Monday and created overflow plenary and breakout sessions.

At their earlier weekend session, the 250 participating students mapped out strategies for bringing J Street's approach to college campuses and encouraging students to join in the effort.

"We don't want to isolate people because they don't feel quite so comfortable with 'pro-Israel,' so we say 'pro-peace,'" said American University junior Lauren Barr of the "J Street U" slogan, "but behind that is 'pro-Israel.'"

Barr, secretary of the J Street U student board that decided the slogan's terminology, explained that on campus, "people feel alienated when the conversation revolves around a connection to Israel only, because people feel connected to Palestine, people feel connected to social justice, people feel connected to the Middle East."

She noted that the individual student chapters would be free to add "pro-Israel," "pro-Israel, pro-Palestine," or other wording that they felt would be effective on this issue, since "it's up to the individuals on campus to know their audience."

Yonatan Shechter, a junior at Hampshire College, said the ultra-liberal Massachusetts campus is inhospitable to terms like "Zionist" and that when his former organization, the Union of Progressive Zionists (which has been absorbed into J Street U), dropped that last word of its name, "people were so relieved."

Shechter said that J Street U allows students who support Israel to have an address on his campus, adding that nothing more to the right exists or would be sustainable and the only other Jewish student group "is decidedly not political... they won't go beyond having felafel on Independence Day."

J Street Executive Director Jeremy Ben-Ami said that when it came to his organization's work with the student groups, "If the way to engage the young part of our community is to give them space to work through their relationship with Israel, then we're going to do that. We're not going to shut them out, because the only way to keep them in the community is to give them the space to work that out."

J Street itself has repeatedly emphasized the pro-Israel aspect of its identity, stressing its stand in support of Israel and the need for a two-state solution in the face of criticism that it doesn't squarely support the Jewish state.

Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren declined an invitation to the conference after a spokesman said some of J Street's policies "could impair Israel's interests," though several Kadima and Labor MKs have flown in to attend the Washington convention.

Ben-Ami described himself as "concerned but realistic" about the students' choice to leave out the pro-Israel piece of J Street's slogan.

He added, "Some in the community might not want to hear that this is where a lot of young people have come to, but we have to deal with people where they're at and address their concerns."

The student sessions included activism training on using the media, building campus organizations and lobbying political leaders. They also addressed issues of concern, including "Anti-Semitism and Israel," a session described as focusing on the fact that "anti-Semitism does exist, even within progressive communities we often consider our allies" and asking how open conversations can still be promoted. Another event was titled "Reckoning with the Radical Left on Campus: Alternatives to Boycotts and Divestment," and called for "developing alternative methods for change."

One participant, though, expressed surprise when the latter session shifted from the advertised topic of countering divestment to a discussion of how to effectively call for divestment from products made in settlements without a broader call for divestment from all of Israel.

The participant, who spoke anonymously because J Street only authorized J Street U's board members to speak to the media, said the students at the panel were brainstorming ways to make the nuance of their position clear from broader divestment campaigns.

J Street did not respond to a question about the session by press time, but did note that the student workshops were closed door sessions.

Ben-Ami specifically welcomed students at the opening session on Sunday night, at which Barr spoke, though the crowd was dominated by older activists, many of them long advocates of an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinians and in favor of active American diplomacy in the region.

Later, Ben-Ami described his organization's goal as one that includes changing the nature of the debate about Israel in America to one of a big-tent approach where different viewpoints and perspectives were welcomed.

"It is our goal to change traditional conversations when it comes to Israel and to broaden the notion that there is only one way to express love and concern for it," Ben-Ami said to applause. "We are here to redefine and expand the very concept of being pro-Israel. No longer should this 'pro-' require an 'anti-.'"

He read letters of support from President Shimon Peres and opposition leader Tzipi Livni, neither of whom were able to attend but both of whom expressed support for including a wide swath of American Jews in the issues connected to Israel.

"For too long, our voice - the voice of mainstream progressive Jews on Israel - has been absent from the political playing field in Washington and around the country," Ben-Ami told the crowd, noting that many have focused on other issues.

"When it comes to Israel, our voices and our positions have been drowned out by those to our right with the intensity and passion of single-issue, single-minded advocates. As we care deeply about the State of Israel and the security of the Jewish people, so too does this passionate minority," he said.

He declared, though, that "we come here to Washington, DC, to make clear to politicians and policy-makers alike that no one group speaks for Jewish Americans as a whole."

The goal, he said, was "to make our voices heard and our power felt from the corridors of power in Washington, DC, to the campaign trails in all 50 states."

J Street student head: We're pro-Israel

By Hilary Leila Krieger

October 29, 2009

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1256740789493&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

Following controversy in some quarters of the Jewish community over the decision of the J Street U student board **not to include "pro-Israel" in its messaging**, J Street sent out statements this week affirming the organization's commitment to Israel.

They also referred to "incorrect reports" on the decision, with student board president Sophia Manuel putting out a statement Wednesday that, "The national board of J Street U neither discussed nor voted on any action to remove the term 'pro-Israel' from our platform, policy or the way we describe ourselves at J Street U's national conference."

The Jerusalem Post, which first reported the decision, did not suggest it had been made at the national conference, held this weekend. But participants told the *Post* that it had been disseminated then to students in attendance.

The decision itself was made last year when the student board began discussing what the baseline message for student groups participating in J Street U should be, according to several students.

As student board secretary and J Street intern Lauren Barr told the *Post* following her speech at the conference's opening session Sunday night, "We talked a lot about formulating a unified message, a banner under which we can all stand proudly."

While the parent organization of J Street refers to itself as a "pro-Israel, pro-peace" organization, in contrast the J Street U student board felt that their "unified message" would simply be "pro-peace."

Another member of the student board, Yonatan Schechter, said Sunday the students "decided that we would use the 'pro-peace' terminology [because] it was more conducive to discussion. With our generation, it seems that if you use 'pro-Israel,' people really want to say 'anti-Palestine.'"

As part of J Street U's promotion of student autonomy, Barr explained that individual university chapters and affiliated student groups could then include "pro-Israel," "pro-Israel, pro-Palestine," or other slogans with which they felt comfortable.

"We don't want to isolate people because they don't feel quite so comfortable with 'pro-Israel,' so we say 'pro-peace,'" Barr told the *Post*, "but behind that is 'pro-Israel.'"

When asked for comment Monday, J Street Executive Director Jeremy Ben-Ami did not dispute the students' statements, saying, "If the way to engage the young part of our community is to give them space to work through their relationship with Israel, then we're going to do that. We're not going to shut them out, because the only way to keep them in the community is to give them the space to work that out."

In subsequent e-mails to the press, however, J Street staff stressed that the students' terminology should not be interpreted as a lack of support for Israel.

"We are building this movement because we care about Israel, its future and the future of the entire Middle East," Manuel said in her statement. "To us being pro-Israel is intertwined with being pro-Palestine, and recognizing this is a vital step in the pursuit of a lasting peace."

J Street Absorbs Another Pro-Peace Group

By Hilary Leila Krieger

October 25, 2009

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1256150041519&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

J Street, on the eve of its first annual conference, announced it will be folding a leading national progressive Israel-oriented grassroots organization into its operation.

Absorbing Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, whose name will be phased out, is another sign of J Street's emergence as the dominant voice of the self-described "pro-Israel, pro-peace" movement, as its 1,200-participants-strong convention opens Sunday.

Though Israel's Ambassador to the US Michael Oren refused an invitation to attend and several members of Congress backed out of the event amidst criticism over the organization's policies, the 18-month-old lobby and political action committee will still be featuring top administration officials and several opposition party MKs at the four-day event.

US National Security Adviser James Jones will be delivering the keynote address on Tuesday, while Kadima MKs Meir Sheerit and Shlomo Molla will also be appearing.

Several Labor members, including MKs Yuli Tamir and Amir Peretz, will also be participating. Kadima Party leader MK Tzipi Livni sent a note to the group expressing her regrets at not being able to attend.

The conference will feature panels on US-Israel relations and diplomacy with Iran, topped off by a gala Tuesday night whose host committee includes some 150 members of Congress.

Though a handful withdrew their names, some because they said they didn't know their staff had put them on the list, those who have confirmed their inclusion include Representative Jane Harman (D-California) and Representative Steve Israel (D-New York). The event will be followed by a lobbying day on Capitol Hill on Wednesday.

Incorporating Brit Tzedek - with 40 chapters and nearly 50,000 members around the country - will provide J Street with a larger grassroots network so that members of Congress also hear from their local constituents.

The alliance will also give J Street a head start on launching its own field operations. J Street has brought on veteran political operative Laurie Moskowitz, who ran the field

operation for Al Gore in the 2000 presidential race, among other campaigns, as a senior adviser to coordinate the effort.

"Our job now is to do everything possible to ensure President Obama's success with his peacemaking efforts to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Together with J Street, we can significantly ramp up our strategic grassroots organizing campaigns to the next level," said Steve Masters, Brit Tzedek's president.

HA'ARETZ

How can J Street support and question Israel at the same time?

By J.J. Goldberg, The Forward

October 30, 2009

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1124782.html>

The first national conference of J Street, the self-described "pro-Israel, pro-peace" lobby, convened October 25 in Washington, D.C., with all the understated reserve of a new iPhone launch or the christening of the Queen Mary. Gathered in a swank hotel a short walk from the White House, some 1,500 activists from across the country sat through hours of speeches by big-shot politicians and diplomats, earnestly debated tactics and philosophy, handed out awards over chicken dinners and jabbered excitedly in the corridors. Outwardly it looked like any other major Jewish organization rallying its troops and flexing its muscles.

But this was, as J Streeters boasted and critics complained, no ordinary Jewish convention. These conventioners were rallying not to defend Israeli actions and reaffirm Jewish virtue but to challenge and question. It's no easy trick these days to convince 1,500 Jewish liberals to pay their own way to Washington for the purpose of fighting over Jewish values. J Street's success in pulling it off surely earns them some bragging rights, whatever one thinks of their positions.

Up to a point, that is. J Street's conference was an impressive feat, but it's not quite the game-changer it's been made out to be - at least, not yet. On examination, this shiny new vehicle turns out to have a few kinks built into its design. They'll have to be addressed if the organization hopes to succeed.

The core problem is that J Street has two main stated goals, and they don't really fit together. The first goal is to "broaden" the definition of what it means to be pro-Israel, to open up Jewish community discourse to a wider range of acceptable opinions. The second goal is to lobby for an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord that leads to a two-state solution. It became evident during the convention that you can't do both.

By advertising itself as a forum for free and open discussion of Israel, warts and all, the conference predictably attracted a contingent of Jews who are ambivalent or hostile toward Israel. They weren't on the program, but they spoke up in breakout sessions and gathered in clusters in the hallways. Some came to paint Israel as the guilty party and argue for sweeping Israeli concessions without regard for Israel's security. Some opposed the very idea of Jewish statehood. Most came to Washington expecting to help shape J Street's goals and gain political influence for their views.

What they found was an organization that defines itself as wholly committed to Israeli security, that favors an Israeli-Palestinian accord as a way to ensure Israel's security as a Jewish state. If that wasn't obvious beforehand, J Street's architect and executive director, Jeremy Ben-Ami, pointedly drew a line in the sand in an October 23 interview with

journalist Jeffrey Goldberg (full disclosure: not me) on the Web site of The Atlantic.

Sounding more hawkish than he had in the past, Ben-Ami ruled out cuts in American military aid to Israel, endorsed the Law of Return, denounced the so-called "one-state solution" and repeatedly distanced himself from individuals and groups on the left that reject Zionism. Arriving at the conference two days later, the outliers - let's call them "un-Zionists" - were in an ornery mood, feeling duped and gobsmacked. In one breakout session on how broadly to define "pro-Israel" (full disclosure: this was moderated by yours truly) one audience member emotionally protested the very idea that she should define herself as pro-Israel. At another session, a participant objected to the suggestion that advocates of territorial compromise should emphasize their love of Israel. Some greeted Rabbi Eric Yoffie of the Union for Reform Judaism with boos when he criticized the Goldstone report.

All this left J Street in a ticklish position. By calling for unfettered debate, it had essentially invited the un-Zionists to come and participate. Objecting to their presence would undercut its declared commitment to open discussion. But embracing them would undermine its credibility as a pro-Israel organization advocating compromise as a means to strengthen Israel's security, not weaken it. Ben-Ami and others argued that a firm pro-Israel stance would make the un-Zionists want to leave. But the un-Zionists gave no sign that they would leave willingly. J Street could be in for a fight that will leave it tainted with a McCarthyite image in the eyes of some liberals it needs to recruit.

The hard truth is that both of J Street's goals are important. Growing numbers of American Jews are struggling with their relationship to Israel. They shouldn't be cast out. The community urgently needs a forum for members to engage over their differences rather than turn their backs on one another. It also needs a strong voice for security through peace and compromise. But they're two different jobs. One vehicle can't do both.

HA'ARETZ

Oren Will Not Attend J Street Conference in D.C. Next Week

By Barak Ravid

October 25, 2009

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1123044.html>

While the Israeli Ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren, has declined to attend next week's conference sponsored by the left-leaning J Street advocacy group in the American capital, on the contention that it is acting against the interests of the Israeli government, President Shimon Peres has sent the group a letter of congratulations on its activities.

In his letter to J Street's executive director, Jeremy Ben-Ami, in response to an invitation to Peres to attend the gathering, the Israeli president wrote "While I am fully aware of the importance of your first national conference, regrettably my commitments prevent me from attending. However, I wish to congratulate you on your initiative to form a pro-Israeli-Palestinian and pro-Israeli-Arab peace organization, and the support you have garnered on behalf of this mission in the American political and Jewish communities arena is indeed impressive."

Opposition leader Tzipi Livni (Kadima) also sent a letter saying she would not attend the conference, but that the party will be represented by Haim Ramon and MKs Shlomo Molla and Meir Sheerit. Livni noted that although she doesn't agree with some of J Street's positions, she said it is a legitimate organization which should be engaged in dialogue. She congratulated the organization on the conference.

In his letter, Peres also noted: "The Israel that stretches out its hand in peace is not only an Israel that addresses a geo-political reality and discharges its strategic interests: it is an Israel that acts according to the commands of the conscience and values of the Jewish People." He concluded his letter by writing, "I wish the organizers and participants of this conference a successful and fruitful event."

Among those who will be attending the conference are U.S. National Security Adviser James Jones, in addition to many members of Congress.

HA'ARETZ

StandWithUs Takes Anti-J Street Stand

Cnaan Liphshiz

October 23, 2009

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1123080.html>

Breaking with the cautious attitude of major Jewish institutions, a prominent pro-Israel group in the U.S. has launched a scathing verbal attack on J Street, the left-leaning U.S. lobby for Israel, ahead of its inaugural conference which begins Sunday.

In a recent statement, StandWithUs - a nonprofit working to counter anti-Israel and anti-Semitic phenomena on campuses - asserted that since its foundation last April, J Street has "echoed" the position of professors John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, who argue the "Israel lobby" is too powerful in Washington.

"One of the most dangerous things that can be said about Jews is that they control the world, or America, or American foreign policy," said Roz Rothstein from Los Angeles, who founded StandWithUs in 2001.

Rothstein, who visited Israel this week for the Presidential Conference, argued J Street "contributes to this way of thinking" with statements like the one made on June 9 by J Street's executive director Jeremy Ben Ami, who wrote that "for decades, established pro-Israel groups have enforced right-wing message discipline on Israel in Congress."

Not worth a reaction

A spokesperson for the self-described "pro-Israel, pro-peace" lobby, Amy Spitalnick, told Anglo File on Monday that her organization had no comment on this and other accusations by StandWithUs "because they do not merit a reaction." One J Street supporter called the advocacy group's letter a "lie-filled dossier" and "smear sheet".

StandWithUs wrote its protest letter to the J Street conference's 160-person congressional host committee, which includes John Kerry, Henry Waxman and Dianne Feinstein. Israel's ambassador to the U.S., Michael Oren, said he will not attend the J Street conference, set to take place next week in Washington D.C.

In a 2,000-word response to the 800-word letter by StandWithUs, Richard Silverstein, a writer known for his critical approach to Israel who will lead a discussion on blogging during the J Street Conference, wrote that the Walt and Mearsheimer reference was "so patently false it isn't even worth engaging [which]."

StandWithUs, which has an annual budget of roughly \$4 million, also wrote that J Street, whose annual budget is \$3 million, drew "a moral equivalence" between Israel and Hamas when the lobby group said during Israel's recent campaign in Gaza that "it could not identify who was right or who was wrong."

This claim, Silverstein argued, should be examined against J Street's full statement, which he says "bears no resemblance whatsoever" to what StandWithUs said. Referring to Israel's conflict with Hamas, J Street - which calls on U.S. and Israeli politicians to "find ways to engage Hamas" - went on to write in the petition that "there are many who recognize elements of truth on both sides."

According to Rothstein, StandWithUs will send a delegation of observers - whose makeup and identity she would not disclose - to the J Street conference next week.

"Though it's probably made up of fine people, J Street's message can be dangerous," said Rothstein. "It has a very attractive-looking pitch that speaks of peace and love, which we all want, but that world view only works with those who share it. Hamas doesn't, Iran doesn't and many others don't share it either."

HA'ARETZ

Poet Booted From J Street Meet for Comparing Guantanamo to Auschwitz

By Natasha Mozgovaya

October 20, 2009

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1122325.html>

Five days ahead of the leftist pro-Israeli lobby J Street's first National Conference in Washington, D.C., the controversies continue to mount. The Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren refuses to attend the conference, despite the open letter issued by the organization's Executive Director Jeremy Ben-Ami; but over the weekend the lobby took one more step to appease critics.

The poetry session, featuring three artists - Kevin Coval, Tracy Soren and Josh Healey, scheduled as part of the "Culture as a Tool for Change" track, was canceled. Apparently, the event was nixed following a reminder by a conservative blogger that Healey, a Jewish activist and poet, compared Guantanamo prison to Auschwitz.

J-Street's Ben-Ami issued the following explanation: "As a matter of principle, J Street respects the dissenting voice that poetry can represent in society and politics. We acknowledge that expression and language are used differently in the arts and artistic expression when compared to their use in political argumentation. Nevertheless, as J Street is critical of the use and abuse of Holocaust imagery and metaphors by politicians and pundits on the right, it would be inappropriate for us to feature poets at our Conference whose poetry has used such imagery in the past and might also be offensive to some conference participants."

In an interview with *Haaretz*, Josh Healey didn't conceal his disappointment. "I had a conversation with 'J Street' staff, and they explained that they are playing the game - Washington politics, and seeking legitimacy. And they are not willing to fight this battle. I was born in Washington, so I'm not surprised to become Van Jones of J Street," (U.S. President Barack Obama's "green jobs czar" who resigned over the controversy about his past political associations).

"So Van Jones resigned, but did the right wing stop attacking Obama? On one level, I understand them - it's easier to get rid of the poet, who cares? But as an artist and a Jewish activist, it's a matter of principle. If you're trying to be an alternative to AIPAC - don't behave like AIPAC."

"I told them I don't think it's the legitimacy they want, because it's not the legitimacy that makes change. When you're trying to make change, you must expect that some people will push back. But they kick out their allies - and I still consider myself an ally. I'm not personally offended - I'm politically disappointed. It's ironic that we were invited to

perform and be a part of the dialogue at the track 'The culture as a tool for change.' But we can't even have this dialogue. The Jewish community acts like children, with smear campaigns and name-calling. I am not surprised by the right wing attacks - but that J-Street went along with it and accommodated it."

Referring to the specific line which stirred the negative emotions, Healey said: "It was taken out of context. Judged by themselves, these lines don't even make sense. Just before this line, I wrote: 'I remember when the German soldiers put yellow stars on my family coats and they put pink ones on my friends.' I was talking about de-humanization. And yes, I have family that was killed in the Holocaust. There were Jewish people killed and gay people and Gypsies, and many others, and as a Jew, my solidarity is with my people - and with all people. And my solidarity is with the people of Israel - but also with the people of Palestine. And I believe in two state solution and peace and justice for all people. And if J-Street are not willing to have debate with people who believe in solidarity and humanity, I don't know what legitimacy they want, because it's not a moral legitimacy."

"I love my people, the Jewish people, and that's why I'm critical - because it's my people, my family that are silencing people the same way we were silenced and suppressed for centuries," Healey concluded.



US: Leftist Jewish Camp Bolsters Grassroots Efforts

J Street announces that it is joining forces with Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, a 50,000-member group

Yitzhak Benhorin

October 25, 2009

<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3794715,00.html>

WASHINGTON - The leftist Jewish camp in the US is undertaking significant efforts to build a strong grassroots movement, as 20 leftist pro-Israel groups prepare to take part in a convention organized by J Street.

J Street announced today that it has reached an agreement under which Brit Tzedek v'Shalom chapters and activists along with its Rabbinic Cabinet will become part of its new National Grassroots Program.

In seven years, Brit Tzedek has experienced tremendous growth by mobilizing nearly 50,000 activists in 41 chapters and over 1,000 rabbis all.

J Street also announced that veteran political organizer Laurie Moskowitz, who ran presidential candidate Al Gore's field campaign in 2000, will join its team as a senior advisor responsible for building out the field organization and grassroots efforts to support the pro-Israel, pro-peace organization's strategic initiatives.

Working together with the Deputy Field Organizer, Carinne Luck, Moskowitz will offer strategic guidance to J Street based on decades of experience in campaign and advocacy efforts.

Meanwhile, Washington Post reported Saturday that about 150 Democratic Congress members are expected to take part in the convention organized by J Street, while 10 others announced in recent days they will not be attending, apparently because of Israeli pressure.

Israel's US Ambassador Michael Oren already announced that he will not be attending the event, voicing fears that J Street endorses policy that may undermine Israel's positions.



J Streeters hit Hill

October 29, 2009

<http://jta.org/news/article/2009/10/29/1008813/j-streeters-hit-hill>

WASHINGTON (JTA) -- Hundreds of J Street activists lobbied Congress for deeper U.S. involvement in Israeli-Arab peace talks.

J Street, the dovish pro-Israel lobby, said that 700 of the 1,500 people who attended its first conference spent Wednesday on Capitol Hill lobbying "for clear and unequivocal Congressional support for a negotiated, two-state resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" and a "critical role" by the United States in those talks, a statement said.

The activists had meetings in 210 of the 535 lawmakers' offices on the Hill, including about 100 meetings with the lawmakers themselves, the statement said.

[Click to login and write a letter to the editor or register for a new account.](#)



J Street Leader Opens Confab with Plea for Discourse

October 26, 2009

<http://jta.org/news/article/2009/10/26/1008718/j-street-leader-were-fighting-for-heart-and-soul-of-jewish-community>

WASHINGTON (JTA) -- The leader of J Street said his movement is "fighting for the heart and soul of the American Jewish community," as the group's inaugural conference opened in Washington.

"I trust the American Jewish community is strong enough to handle wide-open discourse," J Street Executive Director Jeremy Ben-Ami told more than 1,000 delegates at the conference's opening session. "The Jewish community here should reflect the best of what it means to be Jewish," adding that "tolerance and free expression" are values that are praised in Judaism.

Ben-Ami, who claimed that a majority of American Jews agree with J Street's policies, said a key goal of his organization is to "change the traditional conversation when it comes to Israel and broaden the notion there is only one way" to be pro-Israel.

"No longer should this 'pro' require an 'anti,' " Ben-Ami said, who also said his "movement" aims to define support for the creation of a Palestinian state as a "core pro-Israel position" and that they "want action" and "want the conflict to end."

The conference of the self-described "pro-Israel, pro-peace" organization was hit in the past two weeks by the withdrawal of a dozen members of Congress who had signed up to be part of the group's 160-member host committee. They dropped out after pressure from critics who have depicted the group as outside the Jewish and pro-Israel mainstream because of J Street's criticism of last winter's Gaza war and opposition to additional Iran sanctions at the present time.

Ben-Ami thanked the members of Congress that stuck with the group.

"I know the pressure they came under the past few days," he said. "The overwhelming number showed the political courage and practical sense so sorely needed" to achieve solutions in the Middle East.



Livni Letter Backs J Street

October 22, 2009

<http://jta.org/news/article/2009/10/22/1008655/livni-backs-j-street-in-letter>

WASHINGTON (JTA) -- Israeli opposition leader Tzipi Livni sent a letter of support to J Street on the eve of its first national conference.

Livni, of the Kadima Party, said she could not participate in J Street's Oct. 25-28 event, but wished the group "much success" at the conference. Livni said she and J Street, a lobbying group that bills itself as "pro-Israel, pro-peace," shared a similar "vision" of a two-state solution.

"In my view, the discussion in the pro-Israel community of what best advances Israel's cause should be inclusive and broad enough to encompass a variety of views, provided it is conducted in a respectful and legitimate manner," Livni wrote. "Along the way, we may not agree on everything but I do believe that we must ensure that what unites us as Jews who are committed to Israel's future as a secure, Jewish, and democratic State is far greater than what separates us."

Earlier in the week, the Israeli Embassy said U.S. Ambassador Michael Oren would not be attending the conference because J Street supports positions that may "impair Israel's interest," instead saying it would send an observer.



J Street Nixes Poetry Session Over Speaker's Remarks

October 19, 2009

<http://jta.org/news/article/2009/10/19/1008587/j-street-cancels-conference-poetry-session>

WASHINGTON (JTA) -- J Street canceled a poetry session at its upcoming conference after the revelation of controversial remarks by one of the scheduled participants.

Monday's decision comes a few days after some conservative Web sites critical of J Street posted examples of the work of Josh Healey, a scheduled speaker at the poetry session.

In one poem, Healey wonders whether "the chosen people" have been "chosen to recreate our own history, merely reversing the roles with the script now reading that we're the ones writing numbers on the wrists of babies born in the ghetto called Gaza?"

Also, Healey talks in a video about showing solidarity with those protesting other causes, saying that for his friends, "Anne Frank is Matthew Shepard" and "Guantanamo is Auschwitz."

"As J Street is critical of the use and abuse of Holocaust imagery and metaphors by politicians and pundits on the right, it would be inappropriate for us to feature poets at our conference whose poetry has used such imagery in the past and might also be offensive to some conference participants," said J Street executive director Jeremy Ben-Ami.

J Street Jitters Before Conference

James D. Besser

October 20, 2009

http://www.thejewishweek.com/viewArticle/c40_a17040/News/Israel.html

Political maneuvering in advance of next week's first-ever national conference by J Street — the pro-Israel, pro-peace process lobby and political action committee — reached new heights this week.

With The Weekly Standard leading the charge and pro-Israel campaign donors adding financial muscle to the effort, many of the 160 lawmakers who signed on as members of a "host committee" for the event's gala dinner are coming under intense pressure to withdraw. According to the conservative publication, 10 already have, including Sens. Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, both New York Democrats.

J Street was also forced to cancel a planned session on poetry as part of its "Culture as a Tool for Change" theme at the conference when The Weekly Standard reported that Josh Healy, a poet scheduled to participate, had compared the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo to Auschwitz — and had written, "We're the ones writing numbers on the wrists of babies born in the ghetto called Gaza."

In a statement, J Street's founder and executive director, Jeremy Ben-Ami, said, "As a matter of principle, J Street respects the dissenting voice that poetry can represent in society and politics." But he added that since "J Street is critical of the use and abuse of Holocaust imagery and metaphors by politicians and pundits on the right, it would be inappropriate for us to feature poets at our Conference whose poetry has used such imagery in the past and might also be offensive to some conference participants."

Also at issue is the non-response of Michael Oren, Israel's new ambassador to the U.S., to a J Street invitation to address the conference. Ben-Ami followed up with an open letter to Oren insisting that "what J Street shares in common with you far outweighs that on which we disagree."

This week the Israeli embassy in Washington responded with a statement saying that because of "concerns" about policies of the 18-month-old organization, it would just send an "observer" to the conference.

Several bloggers noted that one of Oren's first public appearances as ambassador was at the national conference of Christians United for Israel (CUFI), a group founded by the controversial preacher Rev. John Hagee.

Kean University political scientist Gilbert Kahn said that the widely reported pre-conference maneuvering could work to the group's advantage.

“J Street has already scored everything they’re going to get out of this conference just by dint of the fact there is so much news being generated,” he said. “All the anxiety that has produced suggests people comprehend that J Street is saying something — even though it’s reasonable to argue it doesn’t speak for very many Jews.”

But he warned that the conference could backfire if “excessive rhetoric ... pushes them off the map. The biggest danger is that some of the invitees are potential loose cannons who may end up marginalizing the organization as a whole.”

Apparently in an effort to tamp down that possibility, the group declined requests from Rabbi Michael Lerner’s Tikkun Community to participate. In a Tikkun editorial, the group said it was “deeply disappointed that [J Street] leaders rejected our requests to cosponsor the conference.”

J Street Lobby Represents a Pro-Peace Alternative to the Israeli Hawks

Robert Taylor

October 25, 2009

<http://www.examiner.com/x-8131-Sunset-District-Libertarian-Examiner~y2009m10d25-J-Street-lobby-represents-a-propeace-alternative-to-the-Israeli-hawks>

It's too easy to see why Israeli leaders protested the UN investigation into alleged war crimes by both Hamas and IDF soldiers when Israel invaded the Gaza Strip the day after Christmas last year. After nearly a month of shelling a fenced-off civilian area with massive air strikes and white phosphorous, 1400 Palestinians (nearly a third of them children) lay scattered on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. The Israelis lost 14 soldiers, mostly due to friendly fire.

What's more puzzling has been the US response. By dismissing the findings of the report entirely (even when the UN found multiple instances of Hamas also targeting Israeli civilians with rockets), the US is stuck once again stubbornly defending its "ally" in the Middle East, no matter the costs.

Congress, the mainstream media, and whoever currently occupies the Oval Office all tend to muddle the incredibly complex issues that separate Israel and Palestinians (and other Arab states) into simple, dull catchphrases: Israel is the "only democracy" in the region, helping us fight against big, bad terrorism.

Fortunately, things may be changing in the way Americans view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict thanks to the rise and growing popularity of J Street. Founded last year, this lobby aims to establish more peaceful solutions to the problems plaguing Israeli and Middle Eastern security.

Just last weekend, they had their inaugural conference where they called on US leaders to lean harder on Israel and have the freedom to publicly criticize the Israeli government when it is warranted. They also oppose Israeli's aggressive approach to Iran and argue that Israeli security is harmed with counterproductive military responses.

The politics of the progressive and left-leaning J Street are in direct contrast to the hawkish AIPAC, the largest and most powerful Israeli lobby in the US. AIPAC donates lots of money to members of Congress who support Israeli aggression and expansion and lobby to keep over \$2 billion a year flowing to the Israeli militarized-socialist economy. Naturally, AIPAC doesn't have the nicest things to say about J Street.

After AIPAC heard about J Street's inaugural conference, they labeled the largest organization in the country that is lobbying in favor of peaceful solutions to enhance both Israeli and Arab security as "Jewish Stalinists," the "surrender lobby," and "terrorist sympathizers."

Despite the many legitimate points that J Street makes, it's tough to argue against a more powerful counterpart that resorts to elementary-school name calling. But just the fact that a pro-Israeli lobby that doesn't support the cluster bombing of entire cities has a slowly growing popularity and influence is a welcoming sign for peace and a more open discussion about our blind friendship with Israel.

AIPAC and Benjamin Netanyahu may deny Gazan atrocities, support the expansion of settlements, and create nearly every barrier possible in the path to Israeli and Arab peace, but J Street's growing grip in DC might mean the slow end of the monopoly of hawks.



Jones Will Speak with Wexler at J Street Conference

Spencer Ackerman

October 27, 2009

<http://washingtonindependent.com/65313/jones-will-speak-with-wexler-at-j-street-conference>

I'm at the Grand Hyatt in Washington, where at 1 p.m., retired Gen. Jim Jones, President Obama's national security adviser, will deliver a keynote speech on the administration's approach to peacemaking in the Middle East to the first annual conference assembled by J Street, the year-old pro-Israel, pro-peace lobby. He'll be part of a panel with Robert Wexler, the Florida congressman and Obama ally who recently announced his resignation to work for an American Jewish peace organization. My understanding is that Wexler will give something of a reply or critique of Jones' position.

J Street has been the target of a campaign of delegitimization from some of the more traditional Israel lobby groups, particularly the groups' rightward flank, which hold that J Street's pursuit of peace during a hawkish Netanyahu administration make it suspect or inauthentically pro-Israel. Twelve members of Congress cancelled their affiliation with the J Street host committee — leaving a mere rump of 148 members of Congress. "It feels very historic," said Amy Spitalnick, a J Street spokeswoman, about the conference's political credibility, backed by over 1,500 attendees. "It's the largest gathering of the pro-Israel, pro-peace movement" to date.



J-Street Cancels Invite to Anti-Israel Speaker

October 21, 2009

<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/Flash.aspx/172989>

(IsraelNN.com) J- Street has cancelled a poetry session scheduled as part of its upcoming national conference after it was revealed that one of the people scheduled to speak is blatantly anti-Israel. Muslim Public Affairs Council leader Salam al-Marayati was scheduled to give a lecture at the J Street conference being held October 25 - 28th. Al-Marayati has publicly claimed that Israel was the one that attacked the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and he has also publicly praised Hizbullah, which is on the official U.S. terrorist list.

Meanwhile, pro-Israel activist group Z Street has launched a letter writing campaign asking U.S. Congressmen to stop supporting J Street.



Ambassador Oren Says No Thanks to J Street Invite

Yechiel Spira

October 21, 2009

<http://theyeshivaworld.com/article.php?p=40897>

Israeli Ambassador to Washington, DC Dr. Michael Oren has turned down an invitation to attend a J Street conference. YWN Israel reported earlier this week that the ambassador was among a number of senior diplomatic officials invited to the leftist event, adding it was unlikely that he would attend.

About 20 left-wing organizations are set to attend the Washington event, opening next week, along with a number of Israeli politicians, including Kadima MK Meir Sheerit and Chaim Ramon, who explained that one needn't agree with the organization's policies to attend, adding AIPAC is not the only game in town. Kadima leader MK Tzipi Livni, who also serves as opposition leader in Knesset, is not attending by the way.

Oren's decision to decline is a significant blow to J Street leaders, who are seeking added legitimacy among American Jewish leaders. While the conference may be well-attended, the extreme left-wing views of the organizations undermine the Israeli government and its policies and the conference is therefore seen as a hindrance to Israeli diplomatic efforts during difficult times, during which Jerusalem finds herself on the defense against a hostile international community following the Goldstone Commission report.



Rips in the Peace Camp's Big Tent

J.J. Golberg

October 28, 2009

<http://www.forward.com/articles/117880/>

The first national conference of J Street, the self-described “pro-Israel, pro-peace” lobby, convened October 25 in Washington, D.C., with all the understated reserve of a new iPhone launch or the christening of the *Queen Mary*. Gathered in a swank hotel a short walk from the White House, some 1,500 activists from across the country sat through hours of speeches by big-shot politicians and diplomats, earnestly debated tactics and philosophy, handed out awards over chicken dinners and jabbered excitedly in the corridors. Outwardly it looked like any other major Jewish organization rallying its troops and flexing its muscles.

But this was, as J Streeters boasted and critics complained, no ordinary Jewish convention. These conventioners were rallying not to defend Israeli actions and reaffirm Jewish virtue but to challenge and question. It's no easy trick these days to convince 1,500 Jewish liberals to pay their own way to Washington for the purpose of fighting over Jewish values. J Street's success in pulling it off surely earns them some bragging rights, whatever one thinks of their positions.

Up to a point, that is. J Street's conference was an impressive feat, but it's not quite the game-changer it's been made out to be — at least, not yet. On examination, this shiny new vehicle turns out to have a few kinks built into its design. They'll have to be addressed if the organization hopes to succeed.

The core problem is that J Street has two main stated goals, and they don't really fit together. The first goal is to “broaden” the definition of what it means to be pro-Israel, to open up Jewish community discourse to a wider range of acceptable opinions. The second goal is to lobby for an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord that leads to a two-state solution. It became evident during the convention that you can't do both.

By advertising itself as a forum for free and open discussion of Israel, warts and all, the conference predictably attracted a contingent of Jews who are ambivalent or hostile toward Israel. They weren't on the program, but they spoke up in breakout sessions and gathered in clusters in the hallways. Some came to paint Israel as the guilty party and argue for sweeping Israeli concessions without regard for Israel's security. Some opposed the very idea of Jewish statehood. Most came to Washington expecting to help shape J Street's goals and gain political influence for their views.

What they found was an organization that defines itself as wholly committed to Israeli security, that favors an Israeli-Palestinian accord as a way to ensure Israel's security as a Jewish state. If that wasn't obvious beforehand, J Street's architect and executive director, Jeremy Ben-Ami, pointedly drew a line in the sand in an October 23 interview with journalist Jeffrey Goldberg (full disclosure: not me) on the Web site of The Atlantic.

Sounding more hawkish than he had in the past, Ben-Ami ruled out cuts in American military aid to Israel, endorsed the Law of Return, denounced the so-called "one-state solution" and repeatedly distanced himself from individuals and groups on the left that reject Zionism. Arriving at the conference two days later, the outliers — let's call them "un-Zionists" — were in an ornery mood, feeling duped and gobsmacked. In one breakout session on how broadly to define "pro-Israel" (full disclosure: this was moderated by yours truly) one audience member emotionally protested the very idea that she should define herself as pro-Israel. At another session, a participant objected to the suggestion that advocates of territorial compromise should emphasize their love of Israel. Some greeted Rabbi Eric Yoffie of the Union for Reform Judaism with boos when he criticized the Goldstone report.

All this left J Street in a ticklish position. By calling for unfettered debate, it had essentially invited the un-Zionists to come and participate. Objecting to their presence would undercut its declared commitment to open discussion. But embracing them would undermine its credibility as a pro-Israel organization advocating compromise as a means to strengthen Israel's security, not weaken it. Ben-Ami and others argued that a firm pro-Israel stance would make the un-Zionists want to leave. But the un-Zionists gave no sign that they would leave willingly. J Street could be in for a fight that will leave it tainted with a McCarthyite image in the eyes of some liberals it needs to recruit.

The hard truth is that both of J Street's goals are important. Growing numbers of American Jews are struggling with their relationship to Israel. They shouldn't be cast out. The community urgently needs a forum for members to engage over their differences rather than turn their backs on one another. It also needs a strong voice for security through peace and compromise. But they're two different jobs. One vehicle can't do both.



J Street, Now a Player, Inches Toward the Center

Nathan Guttman

October 28, 2009

<http://www.forward.com/articles/117892/>

Washington — Three days in October catapulted J Street from the sidelines of the Jewish community to the centerfield of major organizations. After winning, in its first national conference, the stamp of approval from the Obama administration and from many in Congress, J Street is ready to cash in on its initial success.

But for J Street, the transformation from being the new kid on the block to becoming a serious player in the pro-Israel advocacy field also entails some growing pains.

As it moves to become what one official described as “the second biggest Jewish voice” lobbying on the Israeli issue, J Street is trying to inch toward the center, highlighting an ideology that is closer to that of mainstream Jewish America and sidelining voices further to the left.

It is a cautious, almost unnoticed shift that is moving J Street slightly away from its early days as the *enfant terrible* of the Jewish organizational world. One lay leader offered an example to demonstrate the shift: During the December 2008 Gaza military conflict, it took J Street only a day to come out with a statement criticizing Israel’s military operation, a statement that put the group in direct opposition to most voices in the Jewish community. By contrast, when seeking a reaction to the Goldstone report alleging human rights violations in Gaza, J Street spent six days deliberating and finally came up with a carefully worded, nuanced statement.

The most significant obstacle in tweaking the J Street message to make it more suitable for a large-scale movement is overcoming the debate on the meaning of being pro-Israel.

Posts on Twitter, being sent throughout the conference by participants and supporters, tell the story.

“How do we have honest convo [conversation] re: our history of oppression as Jews & how that impacts how we view [the] situation?” one participant asked, squeezing a moral dilemma into the 140-character format. And another, sending a tweet “from the table in the back,” replied: “This is not a pacifist movement. It is a movement concerned with security.”

J Street's board has also been struggling with the movement's approach to Israel. Lay leaders have been engaged in a lengthy back-and-forth on whether to adopt the term "Zionism" as part of its platform. No decision has been made.

According to one board member, who asked not to be named, leaders opposing the term "Zionism" made the point that the term could be interpreted as giving the Jewish nature of Israel priority over the state's democratic nature, a notion with which some board members don't agree.

J Street's executive director, Jeremy Ben-Ami, in an interview on the sidelines of the conference, sought to play down the debate. "It goes to the issue of generational perspective," he argued. Ben-Ami stressed that he considers himself a Zionist and understands the meaning of the term. "But fast-forward a hundred years, and it is a different world," in which younger Jews do not grasp the meaning of Zionism. "It is silly to insist that any organization that supports Israel say it is Zionist."

Becoming a player on the national political scene also means consolidating the group's ability to raise funds for political candidates through its sister group, J Street PAC. In the 2008 election cycle, the PAC raised nearly \$600,000, and now, with fundraising for the 2010 midterm elections already under way, J Street hopes to double that amount.

The group has treaded carefully around the issue of "pro-Israel money" for political candidates, a term often used by harsh critics of the pro-Israel lobbying to attack what they see as a stranglehold of Jewish interests over America's politicians.

But during the J Street conference, at a well-attended plenary session, it was U.S. Rep. Bob Filner, a California Democrat, who spelled out the issue in the clearest of terms. Refusing to toe the line of the pro-Israel lobby, Filner argued, means losing precious campaign donations.

"I started getting all those phone calls," Filner said, describing his experience after refusing to support a 1994 resolution backed by pro-Israel activists. "On that vote I lost about \$250,000. That kind of money is an intimidating factor." He later told the Forward that the phone calls he received were from supporters of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

AIPAC does not endorse or raise money for political candidates.

Filner's description of the influence of Jewish funds in determining Middle East policy was strongly opposed by U.S. Rep Jared Polis, a Colorado Democrat, who was also participating in the panel discussion. Polis warned Filner not to "give cover" to those "who think there is a Jewish conspiracy."

Filner's charge, which became more blunt as he argued that members of Congress make decisions — at times even leading to war — based on the fear of financial punishment by pro-Israel donors, illustrates the challenge facing J Street.

A senior activist said that while the group is still too small to counter campaign donations attached to more hawkish views on the Israeli-Arab conflict, it can now make the case that standing up for a dovish agenda does not necessarily mean financial devastation.

“We make it possible,” Ben-Ami said, for some in Congress “to speak their mind and vote their conscience.”

The case of U.S. Rep. Donna Edwards, a Maryland Democrat who received an immediate infusion of cash from J Street PAC after being criticized for her stand on Israel, is a recent example.

“One of the problems I’ve seen in the past in the pro-Israel left was its inability to engage major donors to the extent it could have,” said Hadar Susskind, J Street’s director of policy and strategy. “That is one of the things that makes us different.”

J Street was successful in enlisting some significant Jewish donors to its finance committee, but the organization is still facing an uphill battle. The work, for example, of New York’s Sarah and Victor Kovner, big-time Democratic contributors, was not enough to convince the state’s two senators, Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, to remain on J Street’s host committee. While there is no verifiable figure for the dollar amount put forward by pro-Israel activists in campaign contributions, it is clear that J Street PAC, even if it does pass the million-dollar mark this election cycle, is far from changing the way pro-Israel money influences politics.

Some advice could be received from an unlikely visitor to the J Street conference: Neal Sher, former executive director of AIPAC. Sher, who “came to be educated,” said he was impressed by the young lobby’s conference, but he stressed that the challenge now is to build a nationwide base of active supporters.

The AIPAC model of working closely with politicians in their home districts even before they arrive in Washington is still out of reach for J Street. Joining forces with Brit Tzedek v’Shalom provides J Street with a broad grass-roots network, but does not necessarily translate into campaign activism and donations.

Ben-Ami, who 18 months ago still ran J Street from his home office, said he believes that with the growth and exposure gained by the conference, the group will now find open doors in Jewish communities around the country. “We are beginning to take this out on the road,” he said. “Our focus is to get out of Washington and open a national conversation on Israel.”

J Street is an option worth investigating

October 30, 2009

http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&article_id=108095&categ_id=17

A conference being held this week in Washington signals the breaking of new ground on the Arab-Israeli conflict; the final impact remains unknown, but it's a significant development nonetheless. J Street is the pro-Israeli group seeking to serve as a counterweight to AIPAC, which dominates the lobbying scene. This week, the spotlight has been on J Street and its maiden national conference in the US capital, bringing together 1,500 delegates for seminars and high-profile speakers such as Jim Jones, the national security adviser to President Barack Obama.

Jones' appearance is being read as official support for the aims of J Street; people in our region should take note of the organization, and instead of finding ways to dismiss its importance, recognize it and seek to learn about what makes it tick.

In addition to Jones' mere appearance, his address to the group is another item that should be examined, but we'll move on to J Street itself: when Jones said that the administration couldn't tolerate a humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip, the audience clapped. When he talked about ending the occupation and bringing about Palestinian independence, the audience clapped.

Jordan's King Abdullah II told the audience via videolink that he's laid it on the line to Obama and the Israelis: more than 50 Muslim countries will recognize Israel if it halts settlement activity and responds to the Arab Peace Initiative.

The applause is significant; it's exactly what sets this group apart from AIPAC. However, J Street members aren't peaceniks, and they're not doing this out of altruism. Purely and simply, they're afraid that if a two-state solution doesn't work, Arabs will overtake Jews and there will no longer be a Jewish state; its executive director, Jeremy Ben-Ami, has called its line close to that of Kadima, for example.

As for J Street's record so far, organizers were pleasantly surprised when 1,500 delegates turned up, instead of the expected 1,000. Naturally, AIPAC remains the king of the road; there is no quick-fix to the problem of who dominates the Jewish community politically in a country like the US. But J Street's national conference, where Jones identifies solving the Palestine-Israeli impasse is the core issue, then you know things are changing. A segment of the Jewish or pro-Israel community realizes Israel can't be a continuously expanding entity; there's a ceiling, and this has to be supported. They want an end to the tragedy in return for a Jewish state.

We need to "visit" J Street and find out more about who these people are, who they represent, and what their stance is on a range of detailed issues. Washington has become

less monolithic, and if we're serious about understanding what the great powers want from us, we should do our homework on groups like J Street.

'Pro-Israel,' my foot! J Street is an anti-Israel lobby

Harvey Schwartz

October 29, 2009

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1256740791333&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

Recently, this newspaper took a rather benign approach to J Street, recognizing its right to criticize Israel and its policies, and suggesting that Ambassador to the US Michael Oren should have consented to appear at J Street's current conference in Washington to "challenge the organization," rather than reject its invitation ("Miles from Main Street," editorial, October 23).

As chairman of the American Israeli Action Coalition (AIAC), an organization that seeks to represent the 250,000 Americans living in Israel, I know many who have firsthand knowledge of J Street and understand the havoc it intends to visit upon Israel. We most respectfully disagree.

Israel is a dynamic, democratic country with a well-established history of feisty internal political discourse and sharp internal criticism of its various governments and policies. Were J Street an Israeli organization which engaged in such battles within Israel, *The Jerusalem Post's* recognition of its right to do so would be eminently correct.

But that is not what J Street is or does. It is an American organization whose purpose is to vociferously criticize Israel and its policies (as well as lobby for the adoption of policies which are contrary to its best interests) before the US government. The American-Israeli community, having lived in the US, is keenly aware of the serious danger of such activities.

Most American-Israelis I have spoken to recognize J Street for what it really is - a radical, far left organization funded and supported by radical forces. A true wolf in sheep's clothing. Indeed, J Street's executive director, Jeremy Ben-Ami, just confirmed that truth by declaring at the J Street conference, "[w]e are here to redefine and expand the very concept of being pro-Israel." Israel's greatest enemies could not have articulated it any better.

J Street calls itself a "Washington-based Israel lobby group." However, it has not disclosed its client. Is it the State of Israel, which to date has - correctly - not identified itself with J Street? Hardly. Is it the Americans living in Israel? Ridiculous. Is it the knowledgeable American Jews who are vitally interested in the security and growth of Israel? Certainly not.

IN AN interview in this newspaper a number of months ago, Ben-Ami made numerous highly questionable assertions. For example, he stated:

1. That a State of Israel "accepted both internationally and in the [Middle East]" does not yet exist.
2. "The single most important thing that can be done to guarantee Israel's long-term survival" is to grant the Palestinian demands.
3. The Arab rejection of the 1947-48 partition plan and prime minister Ehud Barak's overly magnanimous offer in 2002 to Yasser Arafat of 97 percent of Judea and Samaria - each of which would have given the Palestinians the land they now claim to covet - are merely old history which is not relevant to solving today's "problems."
4. Although the Palestinian leadership is "corrupt" and has "squandered" the billions of dollars, euros and shekels in aid that has been poured into it, the PA is "not a democracy" and "the West Bank and Gaza are, in effect, like two warring states," Israel should nevertheless grant all of the Palestinian demands (while getting nothing in return).
5. J Street is foursquare against Israel taking any military action against Iran's nuclear threat - "even if it were effective" - on the ground that to do so would "give Iran [an] incentive to restart the program."

This sounds like Orwell-speak. Iran's nuclear activities pose a serious existential threat to Israel and much serious and realistic thought must be put into finding the correct Israeli response. Many in our community recognize that J Street's flippant response to Israel's most critical current issue belies its claim of true friendship with Israel.

Recently, J Street announced that it (along with its fellow travelers Americans for Peace Now, the Israel Policy Forum and Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, which J Street has just announced that it will mysteriously "absorb") calls on Israel to transfer Judea and Samaria to a PA which included Hamas, even if all of the PA government's members refused to recognize Israel or even renounce terrorism.

We cannot imagine any friend of the US suggesting that it agree to negotiate with al-Qaida. Similarly, they cannot imagine how J Street can have the chutzpah to claim that it is "pro-Israel" by advocating that Israel surrender to terrorists.

IF J STREET were truly pro-Israel, it would, at the very least:

1. Support the positions and policies of the duly-elected Israeli government, rather than work to undermine them;
2. Consult closely with Americans living in Israel;

3. Call for the international recognition of an undivided Jerusalem as Israel's eternal capital;
4. Call on the international community to more directly and forcefully confront Iran and its nuclear threat;
5. Call for all Arab nations to recognize the State of Israel as a Jewish state without preconditions;
6. Call for the adoption of democracy by all of the countries within the Arab world;
7. Call on the Arab world to itself solve the "Palestinian problem";
8. Call on the international community to condemn all terrorist organizations and activities, and undertake to do everything within its power to eliminate the scourge of terrorism;
9. Call on the international community to specifically designate Hizbullah and Hamas as outlaw terrorist groups;
10. Call on the international community to take the strongest possible action against the rising tide of anti-Semitism in the world.

Unfortunately, J Street has failed to do any of the above.

Indeed, the organization's leadership has never clearly explained why it felt the need to form as a separate and distinct American organization to further Israel's goal, rather than simply join one of the many existing pro-Israel American organizations. This is proof that J Street does not actually have Israel's interests at heart.

At its Washington conference, J Street had no moderate speakers. The Israelis whom it recruited to appear are part of the shameful lot of old leftists and self-promoters. On the other hand, many in the American-Israeli community are heartened by the numerous US elected political figures who, upon becoming apprised of J Street's true purposes, withdrew their support for the conference and refused to attend, notwithstanding the threat of the loss of J Street's financial support. Finally, AIAC congratulates the Israeli government for recognizing J Street's dangerous and nefarious goals and deciding not to lend its support to it.

The writer is chairman of the American Israeli Action Coalition.

HA'ARETZ

J Street's inaugural conference sees successes mix with awkward moments

By Natasha Mozgovaya

October 28, 2009

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1124432.html>

WASHINGTON - The "pro-peace, pro-Israel" J Street organization was set to wrap up its first national conference here yesterday with a political extravaganza on Capitol Hill. Three days in, there have been some successes and some awkward moments.

The conference has brought together around 1,500 participants for discussions on politics, media, faith and culture. They have praised and criticized U.S. President Barack Obama, applauded a lot (for example, Representative Charles Boustany of Louisiana for being the only Republican who dared to attend one of the panels) and booed a little (Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, for castigating Richard Goldstone).

Too many times panelists have sounded too apologetic for the movement that claims to represent the majority of U.S. Jews. The applause for Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), when she said she never considered dropping out despite some good souls' warnings, was too enthusiastic. On the whole, for a major conference aimed at tackling important issues, too much time is being spent on trying to establish the organization's legitimacy.

Ambassadorial refusal

The conference may have gained some publicity over Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren's refusal to attend, but the open letter it sent in response was unnecessary. In the future, the lobby will have to deal with Israeli officials, not only former and opposition lawmakers.

The event has not yet made many headlines, but Obama's national security advisor, Gen. James Jones, gave J Street a lot of credit in his keynote speech on Tuesday by saying that he was "honored" to be there, that he was representing the Obama administration, and that the administration would be represented at future J Street conferences. If the J Street political action committee that raises funds for congressmen is successful, there is a good chance Oren will not be able to ignore the next conference.

Poor start

The letter to Oren was a poor start to the relationship. Behind the scenes, Israeli diplomats bitterly said J Street used Oren to win free publicity. Despite the obvious gap between the positions of the U.S. administration and the Israeli government, there is still an open phone line between the Israeli embassy in Washington and Obama's people.

Furthermore, press releases and open letters often complicate real diplomacy.

There is a good chance that J Street will persist in trying to boost its standing and influence, in part because of the Obama administration's somewhat hesitant progress on a range of intricate issues. The tensions between AIPAC, the older and stronger pro-Israel lobby, and J Street are likely to continue. Although no one can be certain what truly is good for Israel in the long run, it is safe to say that the bitter under-the-table rivalry between the two lobby groups will harm the country.

We are unlikely to see any camaraderie between the two lobbies, but a more civilized rivalry may yet be established. The current situation, in which each group officially ignores the other while privately denigrating it, is untenable. There is no reason for the peace camp to demonize AIPAC, and little can be gained from dismissing J Street as amateurs who will soon disappear.

Capitol Hill is too small and the problems too pressing for such petty mind games; besides, the recent electoral smear campaign was troubling enough for many.

But inclusiveness has its own limitations. There is an obvious problem at the J Street conference over establishing a clear vision and agenda, considering the plurality of voices represented and the clear generation gap. The attempts to define important parts of the agenda as alternatives to AIPAC won't take J Street too far beyond heated discussions in nice hotel rooms.

Over the past 18 months, J Street has made its name recognizable, and controversial. This week alone, this reporter received many letters from angry readers; one of them wrote that "J Street is 10 percent Arab money, and George Soros is out to weaken AIPAC and get Israel to go back to the 1967 borders; J Street is not pro-Israel. They are pro-Obama."

Second label

Over the next few months, the new lobby will have to work much harder if it wants to remove the second label and become a serious player. It is time for the real test. The people of the Middle East are happy to sustain many organizations, but they would be even happier if one of those organizations would help solve the conflict.

At any rate, J Street has already succeeded in one aspect where AIPAC has failed. This week, the Arab American Institute tabbed its fall Arab leadership summit as "historic" because of meetings "with J Street and other pro-peace American Jewish leaders to support what so many believed could never be achieved - a collaboration between organizations representing Arab Americans and Jewish Americans, a collaboration dedicated to peace, justice, and prosperity in the autonomous states of Israel and Palestine."



White House to J Street: We have your back

By Ron Kampeas and Eric Fingerhut

October 28, 2009

<http://jta.org/news/article/2009/10/28/1008792/white-house-to-j-street-we-have-your-back>

WASHINGTON (JTA) -- Israel's ambassador turned down an invitation to speak this week at the inaugural J Street conference shortly after his spokesman was quoted as saying that some of the group's positions would "impair" Israel's interest. The Obama administration seemed to have a different message for the group: We have your back.

On Sunday, before the official launch of the conference, the White House's top outreach official urged Jewish and Arab leaders to change their communities' "hearts and minds" about President Obama's peace push at a joint session convened by J Street and the Arab American Institute.

"We need to build support" for Obama's efforts to restart Palestinian-Israeli peace talks, Tina Tchen said. "There are hearts and minds in the United States that need to be changed."

On Tuesday, another Obama administration official -- James Jones, the White House national security adviser -- hammered home the point to the 1,500-plus attendees at the Grand Hyatt Washington. His message from the White House to the J Street conference was one of inevitability: of peace, of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship -- and of J Street.

"You can be sure this administration will be represented at all future conferences," Jones said.

Jones' message was otherwise boilerplate -- Israel, the Palestinians and the Arab states need to do more to achieve peace, President Obama is committed to a two-state solution, Iran must stop enriching uranium. He did, however, add a new wrinkle to the Iran equation, making it clear that the United States expects Iran to give up all, not just some, of its low-enriched uranium.

But the "I'll be back" assurance earned an extended round of applause and meant a great deal to an organization that struggled to attract mainstream and right-wing speakers. A behind-the-scenes campaign from some other pro-Israel groups and conservative pundits had warned away establishment figures. (Among the critics' complaints: J Street backs

U.S. pressure on Israel and the Palestinians, it slammed Israel's invasion of Gaza and it has criticized other Jewish groups.)

Jones' message was echoed by U.S. Rep. Robert Wexler (D-Fla.), who introduced the Obama administration official. Until his recent announcement that he was quitting Congress to head a Middle East peace think tank, Wexler was about as mainstream as it gets in Congress' unofficial Jewish caucus. He was very strongly pro-Israel, and his wife works for the American Jewish Committee.

Wexler, who was candidate Obama's lead Jewish outreach, remains loyal to the president's insistence on broadening the dialogue.

"As Americans, we are among the most fortunate people in the world," he told the crowd. "I applaud your political energy; we need more of it."

Boos, cheers for Yoffie

Rabbi Eric Yoffie drew cheers from the crowd on Monday during a discussion with Ben-Ami when he said that too many Jewish communal leaders have their "heads in the sand" when it comes to Israeli settlements.

"You cannot convince Americans that it makes sense for an Israel that supports a Palestinian state to maintain a large settler population in the heart of the West Bank where that state must come into being," said Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism. "The simple fact is that it makes no sense at all and Americans, being a sensible people, know that."

Later, however, Yoffie was booed when he criticized Richard Goldstone, the South African jurist who chaired the United Nations commission that issued a report stating that Israel and Hamas might be guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

"Richard Goldstone should be ashamed of himself," Yoffie said, "for working under the auspices of the U.N. Human Rights Council."

Yoffie, a longtime backer of a two-state solution and critic of Israeli settlement expansion, welcomed the creation of J Street. But he ended up harshly condemning the organization for criticizing Israel's invasion of Gaza.

Debating pro-Israel money

It's not every day that two Jewish congressmen politely debate whether Jewish political contributions control U.S. policy in the Middle East. Or one of those members gets a major applause after saying he voted against a resolution that condemned a Nation of Islam leader.

But that's what happened Monday afternoon at the J Street conference.

It all started when Rep. Bob Filner (D-Calif.) told the story of voting against a 1994 resolution condemning the hateful and anti-Semitic speech of Khalid Abdul Muhammad, at the time a top lieutenant of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan. Filner said he couldn't condemn the speech because of the First Amendment -- "How can Jews survive without the First Amendment?" he asked -- and was the only Jewish member of Congress to vote against it.

Filner said the vote hurt him among Jewish supporters, costing him \$250,000 in contributions per election cycle.

"That kind of money is an intimidating factor. I raised a lot less money in succeeding years, but my conscience was cleared," he said to huge applause.

As the discussion among Filner and Reps. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), Jared Polis (D-Colo.) and Charles Boustany (R-La.) continued, Polis cautioned that "we need to be careful to not give cover" to those "who think there is a Jewish conspiracy" to control U.S. foreign policy. Filner retorted by citing two members of the Congressional Black Caucus -- Earl Hilliard of Alabama and Cynthia McKinney of Georgia -- who were defeated with the help of pro-Israel donors.

"That intimidates people," Filner said.

Polis responded by saying that the pro-Israel lobby is no different than any other single-issue interest group in American politics, from labor unions to low-tax proponents like the Club for Growth to supporters of gun rights.

"This is not unique to American politics," Polis said about the pro-Israel lobby. "Nor is this even one of the most influential groups in either of the parties."

But Filner persisted, arguing as an example that labor unions were at least providing health benefits for the members -- but on Israel, members of Congress "are taking positions that can lead to war" based only on how it affects their campaign coffers.

"The Republican Party doesn't give a damn about Israel," he said, but only support it on political grounds.

That finally led Boustany to chime in, suggesting that Filner not "generalize about Republicans."



J Street fills gap in Washington map

October 28, 2009

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8329441.stm>

On the street map of Washington DC there is a strange omission. Most streets are designated by either a number or a letter. But look as hard as you want there is no J Street. Seemingly, a hand-written capital I or J were seen as being too similar; a recipe for confusion.

This exception is seen by the head of the new liberal and decidedly dovish Israeli lobby group in Washington as a useful metaphor. "Just as there is no J Street on the grid in Washington DC," says Jeremy Ben Ami, J Street's Executive Director, his organisation "is looking to fill a similar gap in the political map".

I met Mr Ben Ami three floors below ground level in the sub-basement of the Grand Hyatt hotel. J Street's first national conference was in full swing around us. But there was no bunker mentality here. It was more of a coming out party.

J Street's goal was to give a voice to a "broad segment of the American Jewish community and other friends of Israel who believe that peace and an end to the conflict is essential for Israel's security and survival".

"There was a real sense of urgency," he said, a fear that time was running out for a two-state solution - for the idea of two countries, Israel and Palestine, living peacefully, side-by-side.

"This president and this presidency may be the last opportunity to bring about that two-state solution," he asserted.

The victory of Barack Obama has been crucial to the emergence of this new lobbying effort. The liberal wing of the Jewish community feels emboldened and listened to. A clear sign was the fact that the keynote speaker at this conference was General James Jones, the US National Security Advisor.

'Absent values'

He drew rapturous applause when he told the audience that he was happy to be there and that this administration would be present at all future J Street conferences.

Interestingly Israel's ambassador to Washington refused an invitation to attend. The Israeli Embassy here put out a statement saying that it had privately communicated "its

concerns over certain policies of the organization that may impair the interests of Israel". Nonetheless it would send an observer.

"I think it is a serious mistake on his part and on the part of the government of Israel," said Mr Ben Ami. "We are representative of a very significant part of the American Jewish community."

Opinion in Israel seems divided though; Israeli opposition leader Tzipi Livni and President Shimon Peres both both sent J Street warm messages of support.

However, J Street is a newly spawned minnow in a sea dominated by a much bigger fish - the long-established American Israel Public Affairs Committee (Aipac) which in recent years has been very close to the Bush administration. Even Aipac's enemies admire its organisational and lobbying skills, though some of its more strident critics have argued that it is distorting US foreign policy in favour of Israel.

Jeremy Ben Ami says he admires some elements of the existing pro-Israeli lobby's work. He says that J Street is not there to take on Aipac. "We are looking to give a positive voice to a message and a set of values that have been absent in American politics and in the Jewish community for too long," he said.

J J Goldberg, executive editor of the New York Jewish newspaper The Forward, believes that J Street's primary impact may be to moderate the existing lobby: "If J Street is effective, it will pull Aipac to the left as well. It will balance out the right-wing pressures."

He too stressed the importance of J Street's emergence for the Obama Administration: "When they [the administration] take a move that is going to be hard for Israel, they will have people saying to the Jewish community, credibly - no, this makes sense, hold your breath - this is going to work out."

Fundamental change

There was a strong congressional presence at this conference, though few of the stars from Capitol Hill. American-Arab organisations who share J Street's emphasis on a two-state solution were involved and the Jordanian Ambassador also spoke.

But there were critics. Outside a handful of demonstrators waved placards - one saying "J Street Nazis". I asked its holder, an elderly Jewish man from Florida, how he justified this message? "J Street are Jews who have sold-out, who didn't really support a Jewish State," he said.

"J-Street told us that the Jewish community could trust Obama," he went on. "Well, they were wrong and can not therefore be trusted."

It's a view shared by many more conservative American Jews. The Jewish blogosphere and right-wing pundits have been in over-drive condemning J Street.

But Jeremy Ben Ami says that this conference has been vastly more successful than he had hoped. In many ways J Street is trying to resolve the paradox that in recent years the Jewish community's representative bodies have been much more conservative on issues concerning Israel than the vast majority of US Jews who voted overwhelmingly for Barack Obama.

J Street believes that if the US is truly to recalibrate or shift its policy on the Middle East, then first there has to be a fundamental change in the terms of the debate at home

Driving up J Street

By Michelle Goldberg

October 28, 2009

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2009/oct/28/j-street-conference-liberals>

Security guards blocked the doors to several of the panels at J Street's first annual conference this week – because the rooms were so packed it would have been illegal to let any more people in. A discussion entitled "The need for a regional comprehensive approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict" was so popular that the organisers decided to repeat it. (One of the speakers, Jordanian ambassador Prince Zeid Ra'ad Zeid al-Husseini, remarked that it was the first time in decades of panel participation that he'd been asked for an encore.)

J Street's staff had planned for 1,000 attendees but midway through the conference's first day, they had 1,500, with more arriving. A great many American Jews, attached to Israel but sickened by its government and its knee-jerk American boosters, have been waiting for something like this.

J Street was formed as a liberal alternative to Aipac, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, whose name is virtually synonymous with America's Israel lobby. In some ways, it's odd that such a group as J Street didn't already exist, and that past attempts to create one failed. After all, American Jews are generally far more liberal than their putative spokespeople, and are largely opposed to the neoconservative foreign policy espoused by the Israel lobby. Some 77% of American Jews voted for Obama. J Street is premised on the idea that, when it comes to the Middle East, there was a huge body of Jewish public opinion without a tribune. The success of the conference suggests it was correct.

Still, there remains a real tension between liberalism and Zionism, and even with the advent of J Street, it's only growing. It is a tension that goes deeper than opposition to Israel's current government. How does a liberal justify the fact that a middle-class American, like me, has the right to become an Israeli citizen tomorrow, but that Arabs refugees born within its borders don't? If you don't believe in biblical claims, or in blood and soil nationalism, what's left is the fact that history has shown the necessity of the Jewish state, and Israel is the only one there is, and that not all political ideals are reconcilable.

Certainly, there's much for a progressive to love in Israel – the vitality of its cities, the richness of its intellectual life, the sheer human achievement of those who created a nation out of a 19th-century ideology. Yet there are contradictions that many liberal Jews see but don't like to talk about. We recoil when people like Pat Buchanan bewail the fact that white Christian Americans are becoming a minority in the United States, but we

insist that Jews remain a majority in Israel. We demand to live in a secular state where all races and religions have equal claim on American identity, but no one has yet figured out how Israeli Arabs might enjoy similar rights without dismantling Zionism.

Among younger American Jews, largely spared anti-Semitism and thus the anxiety that they might need to seek refuge in Israel, these contradictions seem especially stark. A 2007 study, co-authored by one of the leading sociologists of American Jewry, found that among non-Orthodox Jews under 35, only 54% are "comfortable with the idea of a Jewish state." American Jews and Israelis are growing apart, their values ever more divergent.

To plenty of people on the left, and not only on the left, there's an easy solution to the Israel dilemma: a single, bi-national state. Like Communism, this seems just in theory but would be catastrophic in practice. Who really believes that the Israelis and Palestinians could coexist in a way that Serbs, Croats and Bosnians could not? The end of Zionism would merely be the beginning of a new nightmare for Jews and Palestinians alike.

Yet Israel is doing much to make even the pained, conflicted love of liberal Jews impossible. Without a two-state solution, the country will soon consist of a Jewish minority ruling over an oppressed Arab majority. Comparisons to South Africa will become ever more apt. And when the Arabs living under Israel's thumb demand their vote, they'll have justice and the sympathy of the world on their side. The idea of liberal Zionism will become an outright contradiction.

Most of the Jews who came to the J Street conference love Israel, but not with the kind of militant, unquestioning love one finds in the Aipac crowd. Most of them don't love Israel more than they love righteousness. The irony, though, is that right now, Aipac and its right-wing allies are supporting policies that will doom Israel as a Jewish democratic state, and poison the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora, a relationship essential to Israel's security. An end to the settlements and the creation of a coherent Palestinian state are absolutely fundamental to the future of an Israel worth supporting. Liberalism may sit uneasily with Zionism, but it's the only thing that can save it.

J Street's Ben-Ami: Our stance is like Kadima's

By Hilary Leila Krieger

October 28, 2009

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1256557978811&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

Seeking to place J Street firmly in the Israeli and American mainstream, executive director Jeremy Ben-Ami compared his organization's positions to that of Israel's centrist political party.

"The party and the viewpoint that we're closest to in Israeli politics is actually Kadima," Ben-Ami told *The Jerusalem Post* during the new lobby's first annual conference, which runs through Wednesday.

"A two-state solution and the establishment of borders," stances Kadima supports, "is a centrist, realistic position," Ben-Ami said. "That's who we're looking to engage both here [in America] and in Israel."

J Street, an 18-month-old self-described "pro-Israel, pro-peace organization," has provoked many quarters of the Jewish community to its political right for taking positions critical of Israel.

But throughout the multi-day convention, J Street officials emphasized support and love of Israel, described the lobby as embodying the American and Israeli mainstream and otherwise sought to reduce the voltage of its lightning-rod image.

Some participants, though, warned that J Street risked losing the large base of support on the left of the spectrum as well as the enthusiasm that prompted more than 1,500 activists to show up, among them 500 last-minute participants who jammed hallways and caused panel sessions to overflow.

But Ben-Ami stressed that "our worldview is going to be out of touch with some of the Left" and predicted left-wing outrage as a result, some of which has already surfaced on liberal blogs during the conference.

"It's going to come because we are pro-Israel, while there are many on the Left in this country at this point who believe in a one-state [solution]," Ben-Ami said.

"We don't want to be defined as a left-wing organization," David Avital, a member of J Street's advisory council, explained.

Pointing to support in America and Israel for a two-state solution, he continued, "In reality, we represent the majority views of the Jewish community."

"I think the J Street conference, the platform of J Street, the concept of J Street, of building a two-state solution now, that's Kadima's agenda," maintained Kadima MK Shlomo Molla, who flew to Washington for the convention.

Kadima MK Meir Sheerit, who also attended the conference, took a more equivocal view of whether J Street's views aligned with his party's.

"We believe in peace as well. We believe in two states," he said.

"They are more left than Kadima, but on this main issue, which is peace, I think we agree."

He took issue with the group for not supporting an immediate ratcheting up of strong sanctions against Iran and called its perspective "a little naïve" in blaming Israel for not achieving peace after decades of effort.

Still, Sheerit noted that he came in order to find out whether J Street indeed backs Israel.

"My impression is that they're supporting Israel, not supporting everything Israel says," he said. "I don't support a lot of things that the government is doing."

Former Meretz MK Avshalom Vilan argued that the rank and file of J Street is much more liberal than Kadima, but that it made political sense for the leadership to position itself as more centrist.

"J Street is trying to define itself as being as centrist as possible," he said. "From the American political perspective they're right to try to be more influential and to try to get as vast support as possible."

But he added that if the 1,500 attendees were polled on their favorite Israeli party, "Meretz will get the majority, no doubt."

And he warned, "The real soldiers are really on the left side. You need them."

One long-time progressive activist at the conference said the position articulated at the conference had led some on the Left to question the stance of the organization and express disappointment at the answers they found.

"More and more people are asking, where do they really stand? Who is the real J Street?" he said. "People feel there's too much flip-flopping in terms of policy and that he [Ben-Ami] is trying to be everything to everyone."

The activist continued that J Street's "not losing the left flank - yet. But there's more and more grumbling."

He added that whatever J Street's organizers would like to claim about its stance on Israel, the reaction of the crowd betrayed a different perspective.

"I look at the applause lines," he said. "When he makes patriotic Israel [statements], it falls flat. The moment he says Palestinian rights, it's 'Rah, rah, rah.'"

Still, many on the Left who spoke on the record said they understood and supported the J Street perspective and its decision to take center-left positions as a more productive approach.

Even Sydney Levy of Jewish Voice for Peace, a left-wing organization Ben-Ami singled out in an interview last week in expressing that hope that it would have a negative reaction to J Street's views, said he was understanding of J Street's perspective.

"They're looking for their own legitimacy, and if they're getting it from [Opposition Leader] Tzipi Livni and [President] Shimon Peres, that's a fine thing," Levy said of the Kadima leaders who sent J Street letters of congratulations on its conference even though they did not attend. "J Street is redefining the game. We want to redefine it more."

But at a conference bloggers' panel - an unofficial session not part of the J Street program - Levy explained that he did not feel the slogan of "pro-Israel," a key aspect of J Street's message, was something he was comfortable with.

The issue surfaced at other panels, where audience members rejected the label.

Judith Baker, a member of Brit Tzedek V'Shalom, a grassroots progressive group recently absorbed by J Street, was among them.

"Are you keeping me out of J Street because I don't like the rhetoric?" she asked. "To say that you have to love Israel or be pro-Israel to be part of J Street is a terrible mistake."

She added, "People like myself have to know whether we are welcome to work for peace in this organization or we are not welcome to work for peace in this organization."

Baker described J Street as being at a crossroads, with one direction leading to a place that's "not going to be that different from what AIPAC proposes," referring to the massive American Israel Public Affairs Committee lobby.

"I don't think it's illegitimate. It just doesn't give a place for the very large group of disaffected Jews who have been driven out of the [organized] community," the Boston-based activist explained.

"There's no place for me. You don't need me. I don't need you. My position hurts you."

But she added that the debate within J Street wasn't over, regardless of what the leadership said.

"I don't think it's a settled thing," she said.

But Ben-Ami told the *Post* that while she and everyone else who attended the conference - both on the Right and the Left - were welcome and in fact underscored that point during his opening address Sunday night, J Street was unabashedly supportive of Israel.

"This is a pro-Israel organization, make no doubt about it," he stressed. "If you don't feel comfortable, don't come."

Ben-Ami made the same point when it came to students at J Street U, the group's university branch, who have in some cases decided to only use the "pro-peace" part of J Street's slogan.

"If there is any student who isn't comfortable explaining their relationship with Israel within a pro-Israel organization, then they can find a different organization," he said, defining pro-Israel as supporting a two-state solution.

He added, "This is a place where we're going to let people work that through [their feelings on Israel], but within a tent that says on the front of it that this is an organization that supports Israel."

That message was one that J Street planned to bring to members of Congress when the group lobbies Capitol Hill Wednesday afternoon.

"We don't want members of Congress left with the impression that we're Jews lobbying for a Palestinian state. The first point is that we're Jews committed to the security of the State of Israel and the ongoing alliance between the US and Israel," explained Maryland Rabbi Sid Schwarz, who helped organize the lobbying effort.

A member of Rabbis for Human Rights, which delivered a letter to the Israeli embassy Monday calling for Israel to conduct an investigation into the events in Gaza this winter, Schwarz explained that as part of that message of support for Israel, Congress would be told of the group's belief that a Palestinian state would ultimately be best for Israel.

But Schwarz questioned the utility of comparing J Street to any Israeli political party, if only because Israeli politics shifts so often.

"I don't think it's helpful to tie J Street to an Israeli political party, because I can't keep up with Israel's political parties," he said. "What used to be right is left and what used to be left is right."

J Street Meet Draws Foreign Policy Heavyweights

By Eli Clifton

October 28, 2009

<http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=49045>

WASHINGTON, Oct 28 (IPS) - J Street, the relatively new "pro-Israel, pro-Peace" advocacy group, exceeded expectations for its inaugural conference here in Washington with over 1,500 participants attending the four-day event.

Turnout surpassed the organisers' 1,000 expected participants, despite a series of attacks accusing the group of being insufficiently "pro-Israel" and of receiving contributions from donors with Arab last names.

While Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren refused to attend the conference, J Street did attract foreign policy heavyweights such as National Security Advisor Gen. James Jones, Rep. Robert Wexler, a Florida Democrat, and former senator Chuck Hagel, who will co-chair U.S. President Barack Obama's Intelligence Advisory Board with former Senator David Boren.

J Street came under increasingly heavy attack in the week before the conference as opponents questioned the group's pro-Israel credentials for its criticisms of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's stance on settlements and the siege on Gaza.

The anti-J Street offensive went into high gear over the past two weeks, with the Weekly Standard's Michael Goldfarb and StandWithUs, an "organization that ensures that Israel's side of the story is told", calling and faxing lawmakers on the conference's host committee to express concern over their support of J Street.

The campaign seems to have found only minimal success - only 10 lawmakers pulled their names from the conference - but it brought high levels of media attention to the J Street agenda and the ongoing conflict within the American Jewish community over what it means to be "pro-Israel".

J Street's platform emphasises diplomatic solutions over military ones and multilateral diplomacy - often with the U.S. taking a strong leadership role - over unilateral approaches.

It has called for territorial compromises with the Palestinians based largely on the 1967 borders with reciprocal land swaps and the division of Jerusalem. The group also favours strong U.S. support for Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations and direct, high-level U.S. talks with Iran to address all issues of mutual concern, including ending Iranian opposition to Arab-Israeli peace efforts and its support for armed anti-Israel groups in Palestine and Lebanon.

At the opening of the conference on Sunday night, J Street president Jeremy Ben-Ami described the group's mission as providing answers to the following questions: "First, what it will take to finally end the Israeli-Palestinian and Arab-Israeli conflicts diplomatically and peacefully. Second, how do we change the unconstructive way this issue plays out in American politics and policy. And, third, how do we alter some of the unhealthy dynamics that have emerged inside the American Jewish community when it comes to talking about Israel."

The group advocates for Pres. Obama to make resolving the Israel-Palestinian conflict a top priority, with the U.S. in a leading role.

Ben-Ami described the pursuit of peace between Israel and its neighbours as a crucial component of the group's pro-Israel position.

"We rally tonight around this simple premise: that the security and very future of the Jewish, democratic homeland in Israel is at risk without an end to the conflict and to the occupation of the Palestinian people," said Ben-Ami on Sunday night.

Speaking Tuesday, Hagel noted that, "U.S. interests are secured by having strong relationships with both Israel and the Arabs. And it's in Israel's interest too."

Hagel went on to denounce those "who pursue a divisive strategy of making the U.S. choose between Israel and the Arabs".

J Street offers what its says is a more mainstream reflection of American Jewish public opinion on settlements and a two-state-solution, which supporters of J Street have claimed is misrepresented by the unwavering support for aggressive Israeli policies - most recently in Gaza and Lebanon - of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

"We will make it clear that a majority of American Jews – and a majority of Americans, period – support the same sensible pro-Israel, pro-peace policies toward Israel and the Middle East that we do," said Ben-Ami. "Yes, most American Jews favor a two-state solution and comprehensive regional peace. Most oppose the expansion of settlements by Israel."

One of J Street's initial funders, New York attorney Victor Kovner, noted that, "The 'settlements' are not within the State of Israel. The so-called settlers may be citizens of Israel, may pay taxes in Israel, may vote in Israel – and they certainly do vote - but they do not reside in Israel."

"They live in another land. And the name of that land is Palestine," Kovner said, as he accepted J Street's inaugural "Pursuer of Peace" award.

"What we owe our friends and family in Israel is our best advice," he added.

The conference - which was attended by a large number of university students -emphasised the J Street objective of widening the dialogue on what is considered "pro-Israel" as a means of engaging young people with Israel.

"So our final goal as a movement is to change the nature of the Jewish communal conversation on Israel. We want to broaden the conversation. We value nuance. We encourage debate and discussion," said Ben-Ami.

Indeed, that debate and discussion was prominently on display on Monday afternoon when Ben-Ami debated Rabbi Eric Yoffie, who heads the Union for Reform Judaism, in front of a packed ballroom.

Yoffie's condemnation of the recently released Goldstone report - which critics say focuses unfairly on Israeli actions taken during Operation Cast Lead in Gaza - was met by a smattering of boos from the audience but the public debate was seen by most as an example of how J Street intends to publicly and civilly air disagreements within the Jewish community.

Yoffie and Ben-Ami found much ground for agreement and both emphasised their shared view that the current Israeli policy towards settlements dangerously threatens the future of a two-state solution

The conference concluded Wednesday with over 700 participants visiting lawmakers on Capitol Hill to lobby for congressional support for a strong U.S. role in bringing about a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In addition to J Street's advocacy arm, J Street's political action affiliate, JStreetPAC, has been formed to offer financial support to candidates for federal office who promote peace in the Middle

East and the creation of a Palestinian state.

In 2008, the PAC raised over 578,000 dollars and endorsed 41 candidates.

Speakers at Tuesday evening's dinner emphasised both the urgency of forming a Palestinian state and dealing with "final status" issues to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - which include borders, the status of Jerusalem, refugees, Israeli settlements in occupied territory, security and water rights - but also expressed optimism for Obama's unique ability to bring about a conclusion to the conflict.

"President Obama, on Middle East issues, we have your back," said Kovner.

*With additional reporting by Jim Lobe.



The Feel of Revolution, But the Hour Is Late

By Leonard Fein

October 28, 2009

<http://www.forward.com/articles/117881/>

Where exactly — or even approximately — is “the center”? Is the center necessarily “the mainstream?” What if, instead of the conventional normal distribution — two dwindling slopes trailing off from a large hump between them — the distribution looks more like a “U,” with most people at either end and the middle nearly empty? Or an “L,” with most people off to one side?

There are endless possibilities. I write on the morrow of the rousing opening session of the much-publicized J Street conference, in Washington, D.C. The folks of J Street insist that they in fact represent the American Jewish mainstream, even though there has been substantial pushback in the weeks before the conference. They cite polling data that show most Americans Jews support a two-state solution to the Israel/Palestine conflict and that most support President Obama’s active involvement in moving the peace process along — J Street’s signature positions.

But Israel’s ambassador to the United States snubbed the conference, to which he’d been invited, an invitation he’d surely have accepted if the Israeli government thought J Street were part of the American Jewish mainstream. Both Bill Kristol’s Weekly Standard and Marty Peretz’s New Republic attacked J Street, and the key organizations of the American Jewish community were thunderously silent in their response both to its emergence and to its conference.

In its planning, J Street faced a more serious problem than the frost of others. J Street is only 18 months old, and in the course of those months it has been dazzling in its ability to win press coverage. Much of the time, that coverage was nearly breathless, as if until J Street there’d been no outlet for those American Jews who were troubled by the policies of Israel’s government. But of course there had been. Americans for Peace Now, the Israel Policy Forum, Brit Tzedek v’Shalom, among a respectable number of others, had been fighting the good fight for years. Yet suddenly, J Street managed not only to put itself on the map; it became the map.

It brought four new things to the table: major-league funding, a political action committee legally entitled to make campaign contributions, an unprecedented skill at public relations — and Jeremy Ben-Ami, whose brainchild and workchild J Street was and is. Nor is who showed up at the table soon after J Street’s birth been merely incidental to its success. The election of Barak Obama meant that J Street was aligned with the policies of the

president of the United States. Thus to argue that J Street is somehow subversive is to take vicarious aim at Obama himself. Some people are untroubled by that; most, so the polls suggest, believe that the president's approach, so different from that of his predecessor, deserves support.

Are the center-left and the left the new mainstream? It's far too early to make that judgment, and there will surely be considerable sniping by the traditional mainstream to marginalize J Street. For now, what can be said with confidence is that J Street has already avoided the classic pitfall of the left; it has avoided the exaggeration of small differences. J Street, with its financial clout and its PR savvy, might easily have taken a "if you're not with us, you're against us" approach, surrounding itself with a deep ideological moat. Instead, it laid down a broad welcome mat, and 20 organizations came into its tent. Among these, at least two were partners in planning, the others more or less active participants. Sharing credit? Not turf-conscious? Though still very much in its infancy, this bold move to inclusiveness attests to J Street's precocious maturity.

In a way, the entire phenomenon is at the same time somewhat insane. A two-state solution? That has been the American position for years; it is, however reluctantly, the position of the Israeli government; it is the position of a substantial majority of American Jews. So what in the world is the big deal? More: It is late in the day. Friends just back from extended visits to the region, including time spent with Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, tell me that the talk there is all about a one-state solution. If that, then night. So how can it be that the emergence of a new organization, committed to open debate and discussion, firmly and fervently within the Zionist consensus on the overriding issue of our time, home to a vigorous understanding that for Israel to live in peace and security as a democratic Jewish state it must embrace a viable Palestinians state next door, that all that has the feel of revolution?

There were very many young people at the J Street conference. By his studied absence, the Israeli ambassador to the United States sent a message to these young people: You are not welcome in the camp. You had the audacity to criticize our war in Gaza; you oppose the immediate imposition of sanctions on Iran; you do not take your cues from our preferences and decisions. No matter, then, that so many find you a breath of fresh air in an awfully stale room, no matter that you seem to care, to really care, for Israel's safety and welfare. Go away.

That message is, in a word, intolerable. In two words, it is both stupid and intolerable.



The J Street Challenge

Editorial

October 28, 2009

<http://www.forward.com/articles/117876/>

J Street's coming out party was an exuberant, over-subscribed success. Now come the challenges.

And they come from all directions. The scope and depth of attendees at J Street's first-ever conference — from participants who lined the walls of packed rooms to well-placed speakers from the American and Israeli governments — proved that the new, scrappy liberal lobby is a force to be reckoned with.

There have been times during the 18 months since J Street burst on the national scene that the Jewish establishment acted as if it were an annoying teenager with wacky, dangerous ideas, who was better left isolated and alone until adulthood set in.

But J Street is tapping into a well of discontent shared by many American Jews who are troubled by the actions of the current Israeli government and sometimes don't feel connected enough to Israel and the American Jewish community to work through their questions and concerns. Especially when raising those questions in certain venues is most assuredly unwelcome.

So they grumble, or stay away. And now some of them have found a new address to park their passion.

If, at its best, J Street is striving to put forward "a thoughtful, moderate, mainstream point of view about how to save Israel as a Jewish home," as its executive director, Jeremy Ben-Ami, recently put it, then engagement with the new lobby is the proper response. Engagement doesn't mean agreement. But engagement can often have the productive side effect of strengthening moderates and sidelining more extreme elements.

In snubbing the conference, the Israeli government sadly missed the opportunity to present its perspective to those who have, until now, stayed away, and to signal that it welcomed informed, respectful debate among all Jews. That exists in Israel. Why not in the Diaspora, too?

But the challenges don't end there. If J Street is to be taken as a serious, pragmatic player in influencing American policy and debate, then it has to be unafraid to live up to its promise to be pro-peace *and* pro-Israel. Ben-Ami said before the conference that he

hoped the group would be attacked from the left, because that would prove its centrist standing. Actually, it'll take more than that to prove those credentials.

J Street's aversion to labels — its board is discussing whether to call itself Zionist, while its college arm controversially decided to allow its individual campus affiliates to omit the phrase "pro-Israel" from their self-descriptions — may be a tactical strategy to enlarge the tent. But it hints of an unwillingness to forthrightly trumpet its core values, even at the risk of making potential supporters uncomfortable. As Margaret Thatcher once famously said, "this is no time to go wobbly." Support for the notion of Israel as a Jewish and democratic homeland that is couched in terms of ambivalence or embarrassment is, in the end, no support at all.

The established Jewish community has choices to make, and so does J Street.

J Street holds national confab; promises local presence

By Eric Lidji

October 28, 2009

http://www.thejewishchronicle.net/pages/full_story/push?article-J+Street+holds-national+confab-promises+local-presence%20&id=4181057-J+Street+holds-national+confab-promises+local-presence&instance=home_news_1st_left

WASHINGTON — J Street held up a megaphone for its views this week, and the echoes sounded all the way back to Pittsburgh.

More than 1,500 people — including around half a dozen from Pittsburgh — attended the four-day conference of J Street, the self-described “pro-Israel,” “pro-Palestine,” “pro-peace” and “pro-democracy” lobbying group formed around 18 months ago.

And while J Street is currently a national organization, it promises to be more visible in Pittsburgh in the coming year as it takes over a grassroots Israel advocacy group with a local chapter.

Criticism of J Street preceded the conference. Several publications questioned J Street’s choice of presenters. Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren declined an invitation to attend (although Israel sent an observer). Some congressmen also pulled out of the conference.

The Pittsburghers in attendance, though, describe J Street as being moderate.

“The conference and J Street were center left, certainly not far left, not by any stretch,” said Jeffrey Cohan, director of community and public affairs for the United Jewish Federation.

Cohan attended the J Street conference as a representative of the UJF. Pittsburgh is one of the few federations, especially of its size, to send someone to the conference, which Cohan chalked up to both Pittsburgh’s ideological diversity and “strong Zionist ethos.”

“We’re the United Jewish Federation,” he said, “and there’s a significant proportion of the Jewish community in Pittsburgh supporting the mission of J Street.”

Cohan doesn’t see J Street as rivaling the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the much older, larger, wealthier and more established Israel lobbying group. He believes the two groups have “complementary” missions: AIPAC to strengthen the relationship between the United States and Israel; J Street to be a strong voice for peace in the Middle East.

“AIPAC has created the conditions in which peace is possible,” Cohan said. “If Israel didn’t have such strong backing from the U.S., there would be even less willingness to consider a peace process in the Arab world. ... Personally, as an AIPAC supporter, I’m not threatened by J Street.”

J Street used the conference to offer several concrete positions.

It believes peace in the Middle East is most likely with a Jewish state and a Palestinian state side by side with a shared capital in Jerusalem. It wants the permanent borders of Israel and a future Palestine to be along the 1967 boundaries, with “inch for inch” land swaps made to recognize existing population clusters in those contested regions.

It believes the Goldstone Report on Gaza is flawed in its conception, but that Israel should still investigate the allegations made by the report. It prefers diplomacy with Iran, but would support sanctioning Iran if the current round of diplomacy fails to yield results.

Several themes dominated the conference:

- J Street wants to broaden the definition of “pro-Israel” to include people who love the land and the country of Israel, but disagree with the policies of the current government.
- J Street argues that it represents the opinions of a “silent majority” within the American Jewish community that has remained quiet for years out of a fear of being attacked.
- J Street believes it can create a forum for younger Jews to engage with Israel.

“There definitely hasn’t been a forum,” said Adam Hovne, 25, a recent University of Pittsburgh graduate who attended the conference out of love and concern for Israel.

Hovne, who frequently visits Israel and whose mother is Israeli by birth, said he has found it difficult to express nuanced views about Israel because those views did not have a strong advocate on the national stage. When he told a friend he was attending a “pro-Israel, pro-peace, pro-Palestine” conference, the friend asked, “So what is it against?”

“I guess it’s anti-war, anti-bigotry,” Hovne said. “I don’t understand why people who are for something necessarily have to be against something else.”

Age served an important role in the conference, as participants and attendees placed themselves into the context of modern Jewish history and Israeli history: those born after the Six-Day War in 1967, or those born after the First Lebanon War in 1982.

“It’s almost like another coming of age for the American Jewish community,” said Rabbi Art Donsky of Temple Ohav Shalom in Allison Park, who was 11 years old in 1967.

Donsky is chair of the local chapter of Brit Tzedek v’Shalom, an advocacy campaign to mobilize support for a “two-state resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”

J Street recently announced plans to absorb the roughly 40 Brit Tzedek v’Shalom chapters, meaning J Street will be increasingly active in local communities.

The move gives J Street access to Brit Tzedek v’Shalom’s mailing list of 50,000 people.

The partnership is still new and largely undefined, but because J Street is not only a lobbying group, but also a political action committee that raises funds for politicians it supports, the partnership could increase activism in local congressional elections. It could also increase J Street's presence on campuses through its student group J Street U, which doesn't exist in Pittsburgh, yet.

Donsky believes the additional J Street presence in Pittsburgh will add to the discussions here. He and others cited the UJF's Jewish Unity Project as proof that Pittsburghers of different political persuasions can debate issues and still remain united as a community.

Dr. Naftali Kaminski, an Israeli-American physician who came to Pittsburgh in 2002, said Jews must overcome political differences and find common ground, which is why he came to the J Street conference.

"I think we have to move away from the thought that disagreement divides us," Kaminski said.

BLOGS



How Influential is Jewish Money?

Eric Fingerhut

October 27, 2009

<http://blogs.jta.org/politics/article/2009/10/27/1008760/how-inf>

It's not every day a reporter attends a Jewish organization's conference and hears two Jewish congressmen politely debating whether Jewish political contributions control U.S. policy in the Middle East. Or sees one of those members get a big round of applause after saying he voted against a resolution that condemned a Nation of Islam leader. But that's what happened Monday afternoon at the J Street conference.

It all started when Rep. Bob Filner (D-Calif.) told the story of voting against a 1994 resolution condemning the hateful and anti-Semitic speech of Khalid Abdul Muhammad, at the time a top lieutenant of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan. Filner said he couldn't condemn the speech because of the First Amendment -- "How can Jews survive without the First Amendment?" he said -- and was the only Jewish member of Congress to vote against it.

After the vote, though, he said he started to get calls from unnamed people in the Jewish community who told him they weren't going to donate to his campaigns anymore -- and eventually lost \$250,000 of contributions per election cycle as a result of the vote.

"That kind of money is an intimidating factor," he said. "I raised a lot less money in succeeding years, but my conscience was cleared," he said to huge applause -- apparently because he stood up for the dominant opinion in the Jewish community.

As the discussion among Filner and Reps. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), Jared Polis (D-Colo.) and Charles Boustany (R-La.) continued -- with praise for J Street for creating space for what many said could now be a wider-ranging debate on Middle East issues -- Polis cautioned that "we need to be careful to not give cover" to those "who think there is a Jewish conspiracy" to control U.S. foreign policy. The statement, which appeared to be an indirect reference to John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's book "The Israel Lobby," got just a smattering of applause.

Filner, though, retorted by recalling the two members of the Congressional Black Caucus who he said "were deemed insufficiently pro-Israel" by the Israel lobby and were defeated. (The opponents of both Earl Hilliard (D-Ala.) and Cynthia McKinney (D-Ga.) did receive a lot of money from pro-Israel activists, but also had other issues leading to their defeats.)

"That intimidates people," Filner said.

Polis responded by saying that the pro-Israel lobby is no different than any other single issue group in American politics, from labor unions to low-tax proponents like the Club for Growth to gun-rights supporters.

"This is not unique to American politics," he said about the pro-Israel lobby, "nor is this even one of the most influential groups in either of the parties," he said.

But Filner persisted, arguing that, for instance, labor unions were at least providing health benefits for the members -- but on Israel, members of Congress "are taking positions that can lead to war" based only on how it affects their campaign coffers.

"The Republican Party doesn't give a damn about Israel," he said, but only support it on political grounds.

That finally led Boustany to chime in, suggesting that Filner not "generalize about Republicans."

The some 1,500 people in attendance at the conference didn't demonstrate much reaction to the Polis-Filner back and forth, but in-the-halls discussion after the session indicated that the crowd appeared to generally side with Filner. That's even though his charges seemed to echo at least parts of the Mearsheimer-Walt thesis, something that J Street director Jeremy Ben-Ami has said he doesn't agree with.



J Street Conference Opens

Eric Fingerhut

October 26, 2009

<http://blogs.jta.org/politics/article/2009/10/26/1008720/j-street-conference-opens>

Many people, especially its critics, have been trying to define what J Street is all about over the past few weeks. Sunday evening, J Street executive director Jeremy Ben-Ami did it himself, saying that his movement is doing nothing less than "fighting for the heart and soul of the Jewish community."

The Jewish community "should reflect the best of what it means to be Jewish," Ben-Ami told a downtown Washington hotel ballroom filled with some 1,200 conference delegates at J Street's inaugural conference. And that includes "tolerance and free expression," values praised in Judaism, he said, adding that "no one group speaks for Jewish Americans as a whole."

"We want to change the nature of the Jewish communal conversation on Israel," he said, and he said he trusts the American Jewish community is "strong enough to handle wide open discourse."

What should be a prominent part of that discourse? "Defining support for the creation of a Palestinian state as a core pro-Israel position," said Ben-Ami.

"No longer should this 'pro' require an 'anti,'" said Ben-Ami.

He also stressed that J Street wants the United States to be pushing the parties forward as urgently as possible.

"We want action and we want resolution -- we want the conflict to end," he said to big applause.

Ben-Ami stressed that his movement "gives expression to the most basic and universal values of Judaism," which includes caring "about the future of the Palestinian people -- not because it is in our interest, but because the Palestinian people deserve a future. Palestinian children should enjoy peace and happiness every bit as much as Jewish children."

"Only through peace can there truly be a state created in our image," he said, one of "treating your neighbor as you wish to be treated yourself."

Ben-Ami claimed a majority of the Jewish community agreed with J Street's policies, and

made a very questionable assertion when he seemed to say that the 78 percent of the Jewish community who voted for Barak Obama last year are all "progressive Jews" who have long focused on other "extraordinarily important" issues besides Israel and thus had their voices "drowned out by single-issue advocates" with a different opinion. (While there's no question some of that 78 percent does agree with J Street, plenty don't)

The conference of the self-described "pro-Israel, pro-peace" organization was hit in the last two weeks by the withdrawal of a dozen members of Congress who had previously signed up to be part of the group's 160-member host committee. Their drop outs came after pressure from critics who have depicted the group as outside the Jewish and pro-Israel mainstream because of J Street's criticism of last winter's Gaza war and opposition to additional Iran sanctions at the present time.

Ben-Ami thanked the members of Congress that stuck with the group. "I know the pressure they came under the past few days," he said. "The overwhelming number showed the political courage and practical sense so sorely needed" to achieve solutions in the Middle East.

Ben-Ami also pointed out that the "voice" being projected at the J Street conference is not new, but "we have found a megaphone." Indeed, while a good portion of the crowd was made up of college students and Jews in their 20s and 30s, there was also a significant contingent of participants with gray hair. The crowd seemed most enthusiastic when Ben-Ami and other speakers Sunday evening made calls for the creation of a Palestinian state.



Kerry Still Trying to Work Out J Street Appearance

Eric Fingerhut

October 20, 2009

<http://blogs.jta.org/politics/article/2009/10/20/1008625/kerry-still-trying-to-work-out-j-street-appearance>

Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) is still trying to arrange a time to speak to the J Street Conference next week, contrary to this report in Politico.

Kerry spokeswoman Whitney Smith told JTA that while Kerry's office informed the left-wing pro-Israel group weeks ago he couldn't speak at the "keynote" slot J Street had requested on Tuesday, "we're just working with scheduling to get another opportunity to address the conference."

J Street spokeswoman Amy Spitalnick said the same.

"In light of Senator Kerry's schedule, we are still trying to find a way to make it possible for him to appear at and speak to our supporters during the conference or gala," she said.

Smith added that Kerry remains a member of the conference's host committee and continues to support the group.



GOPer Drops Endorsement of J Street Event

Ami Eden

October 15, 2009

<http://blogs.jta.org/politics/article/2009/10/15/1008530/controversy-over-j-street-doesnt-stop>

We've heard from some Washington-savvy folks about our noting that about 160 congressional lawmakers have endorsed J Street's upcoming convention. The question, they are asking, is... what's the big deal? Congressmen sign on to these sorts of thing all the time. True enough -- but at a time when some have accused the group of being in bed with Israel's enemies and insisting that it should be blackballed, such a show of support, however nominal/pefunctory, seemed relevant.

Now Michael Goldfarb of The Weekly Standard adds a new wrinkle: Do these congressman even know anything about J Street? (The group backs U.S. pressure on Israel and the Palestinians in pursuit of a two-state solution, criticized Israel's invasion of Gaza and refused to blame Hamas for the conflict, and has opposed the push by most national Jewish organizations for tougher Iranian sanctions, saying the timing was wrong). In this post, Goldberg noted that one of the few Republicans to offer support -- Mike Castle, the Republican congressman in Delaware who hopes to win the Senate seat previously held by Vice President Joe Biden -- is jumping ship, with his office saying it didn't really know much about J Street when it signed on:

When I called Castle's office, they confirmed that they had asked for Castle's name to be removed from the list. I was also told that Castle was "totally unaware" that J Street had been using his name on their materials and that the decision to attach his name to the host committee was made at the "staff level."

"Someone was asked," and because J Street billed itself as a "pro-Israel" organization, a Castle staffer "just said, oh sure, of course." The Castle aide I spoke with was surprised to learn that one of the speakers at the J Street conference had blamed Israel for the 9/11 attacks
<http://www.weeklystandard.com/weblogs/TWSFP/2009/08/speaker_at_j_street_conference.asp> in the days that followed.

So the question is how many other members of the host committee are "totally unaware" that they've lent their names to J Street's conference? How many other offices made this decision at the "staff level," totally unaware that the group billing itself as pro-Israel was actually pro-engagement with Hamas and anti-sanctions on Iran? The number is likely substantial, and the number of Congressmen who distance themselves from this conference is, I'd bet, likely to grow.

UPDATE: Ben Smith at Politico has a related development: Chuck Schumer agreed, changed his mind and was removed before the list was even published; Kirsten Gillibrand recently asked to be dropped, after the list was made public. Unlike in Castle's case, Gillibrand's office says it wasn't asked -- spokesman Glen Caplin told JTA's Eric Fingerhut that J Street "never got confirmation from our office."

UPDATE II: J Street's ~~Jeremy Ben-Ami~~ Hadar Susskind has issued a statement: "J Street is very pleased by the large number of Members of the Senate and the House who have lent their name to the Honorary Host Committee for the J Street's inaugural Gala. As happens in putting together events like this, the list of hosts changed constantly over several months. Names were added and deleted, and decisions on participation changed regularly. We made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the list, apologize for any mistakes and will certainly adjust the list in the days ahead to reflect both those who wish to add their name and those who wish to remove it."

In other news related to the upcoming conference and the controversy surrounding J Street:

* Back in Israel, Kadima Party Knesset Member Nachman Shai, the Jewish Federations of North America's top official in Israel, is blasting the Israeli Embassy in Washington for saying that J Street supports policies that could "impair Israel's interests." The Jerusalem Post reports:

Shai told The Jerusalem Post that he had sent a letter questioning the embassy's policy on J Street to Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and that he plans to raise the issue when Lieberman or his deputy appear before a plenary session of the Knesset.

"This is a grave mistake by the embassy," Shai said, responding to recent comments published in the Post, in which the embassy said that J Street supports policies that could "impair Israel's interests."

He also urged Ambassador Michael Oren to attend the self-described "pro-Israel, pro-peace" lobby's first annual conference later this month.

"It serves the entire Jewish people," Shai said of the embassy. "We have to build a relationship with the Jewish community in America [and] every segment of this community is entitled to have a role in the relationship with Israel."

* The Washington Jewish Week reports on a controversy over the participation of Washington DCJCC's Theater J in the J Street conference:

As chair of the ad hoc COPMA - Citizens Opposed to Propaganda Masquerading as Art - Potomac resident Robert Samet last week sent letters to board members of both the Washington DC Jewish Community Center and the [Jewish Federation of Greater Washington], protesting Theater J's role in the conference, set for Oct. 25-

28 in Washington, D.C.

He urged the WDCJCC board to "withdraw Theatre J's participation as a supporting organization in this conference" and asked federation board members to "prevail upon the DCJCC as a recipient of Federation funding to withdraw Theatre J's participation as a supporting organization in this conference."

Theater J, Samet contends, "is subverting its mission to promote culture in the Jewish community by advancing a political agenda."

The Washington DC Jewish Community Center's Theater J has been working with J Street to present a series of conference workshops on Culture as a Tool for Change. They will focus on popular media, the spoken word, storytelling, short film and documentary film. The conference's overall theme is Driving Change, Securing Peace.

The Washington DCJCC says participation does not equal endorsement:

In response to the letter, the WDCJCC issued a statement: "Theater J and the Washington DCJCC do not engage in legislative or political advocacy and our participation should not be construed as an endorsement or sponsorship of other aspects of the conference or of J Street's programs and policies."

In an interview, Josh Ford, the WDCJCC's chief program officer, said Theater J has "expertise in culture as an agent for change and I don't see [its participation as] being out of the bounds of what their mission is. ... What we're on board with is an ongoing conversation about Israel that we explore through the arts. That's the only thing we're on board with." ...

The federation has not issued its own statement, but Susie Gelman, president, said, "The federation appreciates the JCC statement clarifying their participation in the conference. They have clarified they are not endorsing the policies of J Street."



For Senate, Tasini Picks Up Some ‘J-Streeter’ Support

Dan Janison

October 21, 2009

<http://www.newsday.com/blogs/politics/spin-cycle-1.812042/for-senate-tasini-picks-up-some-j-streeter-support-1.1538896>

Last week, the state’s two Democratic U.S. senators, Kirsten Gillibrand and Charles Schumer, were reported to have dropped their names from inclusion on a host committee for the left-leaning Jewish group “J Street.”

The group was formed as an ideological rival or alternative of the lobbying group AIPAC.

Now there’s a petition from various “J Street” members in support of Jonathan Tasini’s challenge to Gillibrand in the Democratic primary. Among them are actor Richard Dreyfuss (in photo), Democratic fundraiser Stanley Sheinbaum, who’s due to hold an event for Tasini in Los Angeles on Nov. 11, and Tikkun magazine founder Michael Lerner.

The petition, with more than 30 member signatures, says that Tasini "is widely known for his staunch, unwavering support of the very position that J Street advocates: a negotiated end to the Arab-Israeli conflict and a two-state solution that ensures the safety and security of both the Palestine State and Israel. By contrast, his opponent’s official campaign website does not even mention the Middle East in her list of 'issues'."

As to Gillibrand’s withdrawal, Tasini stated on his Web site: “J-Street is an important and critical emerging voice in the search for a just, lasting peace in the Middle East.

“While people are dying in this conflict, is it troubling that my opponent does not find open dialogue worthy of her support. I plan on attending and participating in the J-Street conference and praise the organization’s courage to try to forge a progressive direction to peace through dialogue.”

Dropping the Pro-Israel Pretense

Michael Goldfarb

October 27, 2009

http://www.weeklystandard.com/weblogs/TWSFP/2009/10/dropping_the_proisrael_pretense.asp

I suspected J Street wasn't pro-Israel in any meaningful sense of the term, and the conference seemed to confirm my suspicions, but never did I imagine that J Street would drop the pretense on the final day of their conference:

J Street's university arm has dropped the "pro-Israel" part of the left-wing US lobby's "pro-Israel, pro-peace" slogan to avoid alienating students.

That decision was part of the message conveyed to young activists who attended a special weekend program for students ahead of J Street's first annual conference, which began on Sunday....

Barr, secretary of the J Street U student board that decided the slogan's terminology, explained that on campus, "people feel alienated when the conversation revolves around a connection to Israel only, because people feel connected to Palestine, people feel connected to social justice, people feel connected to the Middle East."

She noted that the individual student chapters would be free to add "pro-Israel," "pro-Israel, pro-Palestine," or other wording that they felt would be effective on this issue, since "it's up to the individuals on campus to know their audience."

Yonatan Shechter, a junior at Hampshire College, said the ultra-liberal Massachusetts campus is inhospitable to terms like "Zionist" and that when his former organization, the Union of Progressive Zionists (which has been absorbed into J Street U), dropped that last word of its name, "people were so relieved."

The J Street conference is featuring anti-Zionist and anti-Israel speakers, the Israeli ambassador refused to attend the event because the group itself has taken positions that the embassy warns may "impair Israel's interests," and its college affiliate has just used the conference as a platform to announce that it no longer considers itself "pro-Israel." Critics of the organization had already seen more than enough evidence to be convinced that this was the case, but for the group's defenders -- how can they now claim J Street is pro-Israel even as J Street itself drops the charade?

J Street is a left-wing group that supports social justice in occupied Palestine and a bunch of other dopey progressive ideas about the Middle East. It is not, as the kids themselves concede, pro-Israel.

Elie Wiesel Mocked at J Street Conference

Michael Goldfarb

October 26, 2009

http://www.weeklystandard.com/weblogs/TWSFP/2009/10/elie_wiesel_mocked_at_j_street.asp

The "independent" blogger panel at J Street's conference can only be described as clownish. The panel consisted mostly of crackpots and self-described anti-Zionists and "one-staters" (J Street director Jeremy Ben-Ami calls the one-state solution a "nightmare," but it seems to be the dream of many of the organization's supporters). Though J Street tried to distance itself from the panel by describing it as an "unofficial" and "independent" event, the bloggers used one of the rooms otherwise reserved for conference events, a podium in the front had a J Street placard on it, and a J Street banner hung on the back wall of the room. Ben-Ami came in to "check up" on the panel, and a J Street flack ejected someone from the room at the behest of one of the panelists. If this wasn't an official event, I don't know what official means.

At the event, Helena Cobban, who describes herself as "agnostic" on a two-state solution, said that blogging had "changed international relations" because now the world could get real-time reaction from the people "underneath U.S. and Israeli bombs."

Another panelist, Max Blumenthal, attacked Ben-Ami for having "capitulated" in an interview with Jeffrey Goldberg last week. Most of the media at the conference were pleased with Ben-Ami's interview with Goldberg -- it was proof, they said, that J Street was indeed a reasonable organization. But that was not the view of the average conference participant. There was "a lot to be troubled with in this interview," Blumenthal said. Ben-Ami had "prostrated himself before this 'serious man.'"

Blumenthal really doesn't like Goldberg. He called him the "Chief Rabbi of a one man island," and then, with respect to Ben-Ami, asked, "if you can't stand up to Goldberg, how can you stand up to Netanyahu?" Blumenthal was upset that Ben-Ami had, under pressure from Goldberg, denounced Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, authors of *The Israel Lobby*, as anti-Semites. Among the rank and file at the J Street conference, Walt and Mearsheimer are revered. Matt Duss, another panel participant who writes for John Podesta's Center for American Progress, said "the idea of attacking [Walt and Mearsheimer] as anti-Semites is outrageous."

Blumenthal went on to trash Elie Wiesel for speaking this past weekend at the Christians United for Israel conference in San Antonio. After mocking Pastor John Hagee, the founder of CUFI, Blumenthal said "the last time Elie Wiesel trusted someone so much it

was Bernie Madoff." Wiesel admitted earlier this year that he lost "everything" he had in Madoff's ponzi scheme. The audience erupted with laughter at Blumenthal's tasteless joke.

Finally, we heard from the proprietor of the blog GazaMom.com, a hijab clad Palestinian woman who said she doesn't consider Mahmoud Abbas to be the legitimate president of the Palestinian Authority. Does she support Hamas? Who knows. "Whenever I hear two-state solution, I shake my head," she said, "I'm a one-stater." Again the room erupted with applause. Philip Weiss, another blogger participating in the panel, looked around and said "there are many Zionists in this room, there are also some non-Zionists and anti-Zionists." I would say that's a pretty good description of the J Street conference as a whole.

One other note: I didn't see a single member of Congress at the conference today. That's not to say there were none there -- there was an afternoon panel featuring Reps. Boustany, Schakowsky, and Filner -- but I didn't see any wandering around. I did see Jonathan Tasini, who is running a primary against New York Democrat Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand in 2010 and has tried to make an issue out of Gillibrand's decision to pull her support for the J Street conference.

Livni Writes a Letter

Michael Goldfarb

October 22, 2009

http://www.weeklystandard.com/weblogs/TWSFP/2009/10/livni_writes_a_letter.asp

Steve Clemons is very excited that Kadima Party chief Tzipi Livni has sent "a knock-the-ball-out-of-the-park...letter of affirmation to J Street, recognizing potential differences but affirming a shared strategic vision for the best interests of Israel." No doubt this is a momentous occasion in the quest for peace, but just a little perspective...

Livni refused to come in person, refused to do a live satellite appearance, refused to do a taped message. Instead she wrote a letter -- and even then she's careful to say that she and J Street do "not agree on everything."

Meanwhile, Media Matters has thrown its support behind J Street and accused one its critics of trying "to destroy careers...sending college kids out to gather negative information about journalists, politicians, rabbis, whatever." Says Ben Smith, "Media Matters, of course, would never 'send college kids out to gather negative information' or keep negative files on people. No, wait. That's its job."

Another J Street Speaker Engages in “Use and Abuse of Holocaust Imagery”

Michael Goldfarb

October 22, 2009

http://www.weeklystandard.com/weblogs/TWSFP/2009/10/another_j_street_speaker_eng_ag.asp

When J Street canceled a scheduled poetry slam at their inaugural conference, J Street director Jeremy Ben-Ami told *Politico*'s Ben Smith that "as J Street is critical of the use and abuse of Holocaust imagery and metaphors by politicians and pundits on the right, it would be inappropriate for us to feature poets at our Conference whose poetry has used such imagery in the past and might also be offensive to some conference participants."

Well, by that standard J Street will now be obliged to drop at least one more speaker from their conference -- Helena Cobban. On the second day of J Street's conference, there will be an "independent" blogger panel including Cobban among other "pro-Israel" voices like Max Blumenthal and Philip Weiss. Cobban is prone to her own Holocaust metaphors when talking about Israel. "When you see the Wall, especially the places where it goes anywhere near built-up Palestinian areas and is studded with looming concrete watch-towers, the overwhelming image that might come to your mind, as it does to mine, is that of the fence-and-watchtower system around a concentration camp," she wrote on her blog in June of this year.

Cobban makes the same point, minus the explicit reference to concentration camps, in the video below (at the 7:50 mark). The watchtowers "send a shiver down my back," she says, and she adds that she asks Israelis "doesn't it remind you of something?" When the Israelis fail to deliver the proper answer -- that the fence should remind them of Aushwitz -- she laments that "people always want to believe the best things about their own actions, don't they?"

But Cobban doesn't just compare Israel to Nazi Germany -- she likes to compare Israel to Hamas as well.

Most people in the west have been wilfully mis- or dis-informed about Hamas and believe either that it is made up of wild-eyed men of violence who perpetrate violence for its own sake, or that its main goal is the violent expulsion of all Jewish people from Israel/Palestine. These impressions are quite misleading. Yes, Hamas has used significant amounts of violence against Israelis since it was founded in 1987. But so too has Israel, against Hamas. Indeed, Israel has killed many times more Hamas supporters and leaders than Hamas has ever killed

Israelis. Does that mean we understand Israelis to be only "mindless, wild-eyed men of violence"? No. For both sides, we need to try to understand what they seek to achieve with the violence they use; as well as the conditions under which they can be expected to moderate or end it.

Sometimes Cobban dispenses with comparisons and simply lavishes praise on Hamas *while* attacking Israel. In one post she attempts to debunk the notion that Hamas is "only the 'terrorist organization' that it's designated to be by the US State Department...made up of wild-eyed, implacable Islamist radicals" -- scare quotes around "terrorist organization" in the original. She goes on to say,

Hamass's founder, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, always placed a lot of emphasis on the need for education, self-restraint, and the need to rebuild the social fabric of Palestinian constituencies torn apart by years of Israeli attacks, occupation (including the heinous divide-and-rule tactics of the Shin Bet), and physical and social dispersal. Gaza Islamic University (badly bombed by Israel earlier this week) was just one of an entire network of educational and social-welfare institutions with which Hamas sought to rebuild Gazan society.

So while Hamas founder Sheikh Yassin is out there doing good works, the Shin Bet is practicing "heinous divide and rule tactics." Is it not obvious that Cobban prefers Hamas to Israel? And by the way, Cobban is "agnostic" on a two-state solution -- a one-state solution, i.e. the end of Israel as a Jewish Democracy, would be fine with her, too.

Other greatest hits from Cobban include calling Tony Blair a "dishonest schmuck" -- apparently he's nothing like the great and self-restrained Sheikh Yassin. Or how about demanding that Obama withhold aid to Israel until Israel complies with the Goldstone commissions recommendations. Or, my personal favorite, Cobban's write-up of the recent flap over a Swedish newspaper that alleged Israel was harvesting the organs of Palestinians. In the face of this new spin on the old blood libel, Cobban declares "there are a lot more dimensions to this story that I want to look at."

Is this -- comparing Israel to Nazi Germany, praising Hamas, trafficking in blood libel -- what passes for pro-Israel on J Street?

A Dozen Pro-Israel Members of Congress Ditch J Street

Michael Goldfarb

October 21, 2009

http://www.weeklystandard.com/weblogs/TWSFP/2009/10/a_dozen_proisrael_members_of_c.asp

Another congressman has pulled his name from J Street's host committee -- Rep. Brian P. Bilbray (R-CA). Bilbray's office called THE WEEKLY STANDARD last night to say they were dropping their support for the event, bringing the total number of congressmen to bail to a dozen even. I've spoken with staffers for most of these members, and all of them had pretty much the same story. They signed up their bosses when they were told the group was "pro-Israel" and that nothing -- not even an appearance -- would be expected of the member himself. As these members found out who the speakers at this conference were, as they found out the positions this group supports (against sanctions on Iran and for engagement with Hamas), they took their names off the list.

Last night I went to the annual conference of the National Jewish Democratic Council -- the Democratic equivalent of the Republican Jewish Coalition. I had the chance while I was there to speak with a number of congressmen and leaders of the Jewish left. Some defended J Street. Rep. John Yarmuth (D-KY) said that while he was "not going to defend every speaker," he did "think it presents a different position." Of course, he admitted that position was not his own. "I actually support sanctions on Iran," Yarmuth said.

Rep. Chellie Pingree (D-ME) was also happy to be on J Street's list. "They've been a supporter of mine," she said, and that's good enough for the congresswoman from Maine. When told that one of the keynote speakers at the event had blamed Israel for the 9/11 attacks, Pingree said "I definitely would look into that--that sounds a little bit harsh to me." You think?

And then there was Senator Bob Casey. He's on the J Street list, and yet he has no idea what J Street is. When I asked him whether his serving on the host committee should be construed as an endorsement of either the organization or its positions, he looked like a deer in the headlights. He was not ducking the question, he had just never heard of J Street before. "It's possible that our staff has done something about it that I'm not aware of," Casey said. But when pressed on the actual issues, Casey knew exactly what he was talking about. Casey noted that he is a "cosponsor of one of the leading bills [Lieberman-Bayh-Kyl] moving forward with sanctions," and he said that U.S. divestment in Iran is "critically important." If it's so critically important, why did Casey's staff add his name to the host committee for an organization that opposes sanctions?

One Jewish Democratic operative who would speak only on background said "When I saw 160 members, I thought "you're going to lose some of them." Of the 145 odd members who remain on the list, the operative said "I don't think it an endorsement of the positions" that J Street has taken. J Street is "still playing Single A ball," he said. "They have a long ways to go." As for the NJDC affair last night, the crowd was small and the press was outnumbered by members of Congress by at least 4 to 1. Steny Hoyer and Al Franken spoke among others, the atmosphere was collegial and friendly. At the J Street event, there could be 15 reporters for every member of Congress who makes an appearance. NJDC may not be a media darling, but their influence was obvious. If this is the measure of an effective Jewish organization, J Street indeed isn't playing in the same league.

Ron Kampeas Pulls Out of J Street Conference

Michael Goldfarb

October 21, 2009

http://www.weeklystandard.com/weblogs/TWSFP/2009/10/ron_kampeas_pulls_out_of_j_str_1.asp

JTA's Washington bureau chief has become the latest name to disappear from the J Street program in advance of next week's conference. Kampeas was to moderate a panel titled "What does it mean to be pro-Israel?"

When I called Kampeas for comment, he referred me to JTA editor in chief Ami Eden. Eden said that JTA had "started to get a lot of calls about" Kampeas's appearance on the panel. "Some of the people who were calling complained, 'how can he moderate and cover the panel'" at the same time. "To be honest, it's not an issue I usually get complaints about," Eden said, noting that Kampeas has participated in similar events in the past with no objection, but "given the hot button nature of the issue, people started calling up and complaining."

Some of those who called were "concerned we were carrying water for J Street," Eden said. "For sure there were people who have concerns about J Street." While saying repeatedly that he had absolute confidence in Kampeas's ability to maintain his objectivity while moderating a panel at the event, ultimately Eden said it was necessary to be "sensitive to the perception" that Kampeas's participation would undermine JTA's credibility.

With the departure of Kampeas, J Street has now lost five speakers -- the three def poets that they cut for the "use and abuse of Holocaust imagery," Geoff Davis, the Kentucky Republican whose name disappeared from the conference program today and whose office refuses to comment on the matter, and now Kampeas. In addition to the 12 members of Congress who've yanked their support, that's 17 individuals who have either distanced themselves from J Street or have been thrown under the bus by J Street lest they provoke any more controversy. When was the last time a conference saw 17 names dropped from the program in the week before the conference started -- and that doesn't even include the Israeli Ambassador who declined J Street's invitation or Senator John Kerry, who looks likely (but is not certain) to be a no-show.

Kerry and Oren Bail on J Street

Michael Goldfarb

October 20, 2009

http://www.weeklystandard.com/weblogs/TWSFP/2009/10/kerry_and_oren_bail_on_j_street.asp

The Israeli ambassador has turned down an invitation to speak at J Street's anti-Israel conference because of -- well, "concerns over certain policies of the organization that may impair the interests of Israel." In other words, Oren isn't at all convinced that J Street is pro-Israel. And apparently those same concerns are shared by eleven members of Congress who've asked to have their names removed from any materials associated with the conference. In addition, the organizers of the conference cancelled a panel featuring three poets whose anti-Israel poetry slams even J Street was not prepared to defend. Now Glenn Thrush reports that Senator John Kerry, one of the conferences keynote speakers, has pulled out and will not attend:

J Street, DC's new left-leaning Israel advocacy group, had hoped to make a big splash with an event in DC next week but the group has been rocked by a wave of defections -- which now includes headliner John Kerry, POLITICO's Meredith Shiner reports....

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry's name is still listed on J Street's web site as one of four keynote speakers at the group's gala, albeit with an asterisk signifying he was invited but not confirmed.

But he turned down the invitation "weeks ago" due to a prior commitment, according to Kerry spokeswoman Whitney Smith.

"As happens in putting together events like this, the list of hosts changed constantly over several months. Names were added and deleted, and decisions on participation changed regularly," J Street's Director of Strategy & Policy Hadar Susskind told POLITICO.

Names have certainly been deleted -- 14 by my count -- but what names have been added? Only one by my reckoning -- General Jim Jones, whom the Obama administration was kind enough to send to the conference in a bid to stop the wave of defections referenced above. Apparently that hasn't worked so well given the fresh wave of dropouts today. Unfortunately for the White House, they were the last ones to board a sinking ship.

J Street Cans Anti-Israel Poetry Slam

Michael Goldfarb

October 19, 2009

http://www.weeklystandard.com/weblogs/TWSFP/2009/10/j_street_cans_antiisrael_poetr.asp

Last week we noted the appearance of "poet" Josh Healey on the list of speakers for J Street's conference next week. We also posted the video of Healey performing his poem "Queer Intifada," which declares that "Guantanamo is Auschwitz" and "Anne Frank is Matthew Shepard." Healey authored another poem in which he said that Jews were "chosen to recreate our own history," but now "we're the ones writing numbers on the wrists of babies born in the ghetto called Gaza." Suddenly, Healey's name is no longer on the list of speakers at the J Street conference -- disappeared without a trace like the ten members of Congress who dropped off the list of host committee sponsors. And Healey's not the only one who's been disappeared. Kevin Coval and Tracy Soren, the two panelists who were to join him for a session on "culture as a tool for change" have also been dropped from the speakers list.

So an encore performance of Queer Intifada for General Jim Jones -- who apparently won't get to hear it performed live when he gives the keynote speech at J Street's anti-Israel bash next week.

the Atlantic

J Street's Ben-Ami On Zionism and Military Aid to Israel

Jeffery Goldberg

October 23, 2009

http://jeffreygoldberg.theatlantic.com/archives/2009/10/j_streets_ben-ami_on_being_a_z.php

Jeremy Ben-Ami of the liberal lobbying group J Street is the man of the moment: The group's upcoming conference in Washington has become a source of great controversy for many reasons. I interviewed Ben-Ami yesterday by telephone, and here is an edited transcript of our conversation. In our talk, he showed that he learned a bit about triangulation during his years in the Clinton White House. He declared himself a Zionist; condemned the book "The Israel Lobby"; called America's military aid package to Israel untouchable; and told me he hopes his group angers the non-Zionist left by staking out mainstream Jewish positions on Israel and the peace process -- "I hope that we have a very strong left flank that attacks us."

Jeffrey Goldberg: Let's just go right to the Stephen Walt question. Why do you think Walt (the co-author of the book "The Israel Lobby") likes J Street?

Jeremy Ben-Ami: I don't know and I don't care. One of the reasons why I won't answer your call to quote-unquote renounce him is that it really smacks of witch-hunts and thought-police. It's not my business to "renounce."

JG: Witch-hunt? How is it a witch-hunt to argue that Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer blame the organized American Jewish community for starting the Iraq War and even helping cause 9/11? It's a statement of fact, it's in their book. I would think that when you have an organization, like you do, one of the ways you define yourself is by saying what you do and don't stand for--

JB: May I finish? I actually respect your writing. I respect your thinking. But then there are the people like Michael Goldfarb, who is a Republican political operative who is masquerading as a (Weekly Standard) journalist. And when he goes after us, and asks people to verify their loyalty to certain principles, that's a different thing. But I'm more than happy to tell you why, on a personal basis, I don't like what Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer have written in their book and in their articles. I don't agree with Stephen Walt. It's his business whether or not he chooses to say nice things about us. I have zero right to tell him, and I have zero interest in telling him, not to say what he thinks. That is his business.

JG: Tell me about the problem with his thesis.

JB: Here's where the line is. There is no question that over the last 40 to 50 years, the American Jewish community has developed a very sophisticated lobbying mechanism to promote its views and its interests, and I am in awe of that as a student of politics. I also happen to respect and value much of what has been achieved. For instance, the special relationship between the U.S. and Israel, the essential security guarantee that the U.S. provides, the notion that Israel should always have a qualitative military edge -- those are things that have been achieved by lobbying, by what some people would call the "Israel lobby." J Street is very happy with these achievements, and we support those ends, and we respect and admire much of what groups like AIPAC and others have done over the years.

However, when the analysis of that lobby veers over a line and essentially says that all of American foreign policy is controlled by this one lobby and this one interest group, to me, personally, this does smack of the kind of conspiracy theories contained in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. This notion that somehow Jews control this country, they control our foreign policy, that there is some diabolical conspiracy behind the scenes, this is when you cross that line. I believe that the analysis in the Walt and Mearsheimer book and article crossed that line, but this doesn't take away from my view that this is an incredibly effective lobby.

JG: You have a situation now in which the Obama Administration has obviously failed to achieve a settlement freeze. You believe that the American government should pressure both the Arabs and the Israelis to come to the table and reach a deal. If Israel ignores the entreaties of the American president, should continuing American military aid to Israel be up for discussion?

JB: The short answer is no, but there's actually a longer explanation for the no. The short answer is that military aid should not be on the table -- this is an absolutely essential aspect of Israel's security, and it's an essential aspect of the U.S.-Israel relationship. However, the U.S. should be able to get across that, as an ally, and as a partner in this relationship with its own interests and view of what will actually move the situation forward, its voice and its views need to be listened to, and that means some serious, behind-closed-doors conversations between the president and the prime minister.

JG: But they've already had those.

JB: I don't know what took place in those conversations.

JG: Well, they didn't work yet.

JB: It's very, very early in the process. What J Street has said is that this issue of a settlement freeze is not the place to put all your cards on the table. If this is a card game, I wouldn't go all in on the settlement freeze. I think that the settlement freeze is an

important precondition, it's an important early issue, but the fundamental issue is to get to two states, let's get to a final status agreement, and it's at that point that I think the full force of the U.S. should be brought to bear on all the parties. And let me be really clear: all the parties. When we get to that point, there should be a very, very different and serious conversation. I don't think this is the point to go all in.

JG: Are you a Zionist?

JB: I am a Zionist personally. I am deeply committed to a Jewish home, to a democratic home, to a Jewish Israel. I'm deeply committed to that and you know my family background.

JG: Ben-Ami is a Jewish name, I think.

JB: Exactly. My great-grandparents were in the First Aliyah, my grandparents founded Tel Aviv, my father was in the Irgun. I've lived in Israel myself. I have 500 cousins there. I'm deeply committed to the safety, the sanctity and the security of a Jewish home in the state of Israel.

JG: Is J Street a Zionist organization?

JB: Well, we are unabashedly for a Jewish home in the land of Israel, that there should be a Jewish home that is a democracy, that has a Jewish character and a Jewish flavor and where the law of return is a fact -- I know you're having a disagreement with Bernie (Avishai) right now. I don't even know what he said about the right of return.

JG: That he wants it repealed.

JB: Well I don't agree with that, I certainly don't agree with that. I think that the notion is that there should be a homeland that is a Jewish homeland. That is the founding principle of J Street. The question is, how do we preserve it? That's where we seem to be getting attacked. Our view is that in order to preserve this, there just simply has to be an independent state for the Palestinians next door, and that's where they will live. And we live in Israel and we live there and there's always going to be a minority in Israel that is not Jewish and we need to treat them like equal citizens and value their participation in our democracy, but it is a Jewish home. This is the Jewish homeland.

JG: Come back to one of the controversies swirling around this conference. Do you believe that AIPAC or other Jewish organizations have been actively lobbying against you and, specifically, lobbied against having the Israeli ambassador come to your conference?

JB: I have no idea. I have absolutely no idea. I hope not.

JG: Why do you think Michael Oren is not coming?

JB: I think there has been a pattern to the behavior of this Israeli government of pushing

back strongly against all who disagree with them. It's a way of acting and behaving that characterizes everything about this government and I think it is counter to the long-run interests of the state -- I think that you have to speak to those with whom you disagree, I think you have to find ways and language and places to speak with not only your enemies but just those who disagree with you. So I don't even know that it's just about us -- it's kind of the character of the entire foreign policy of the government at the moment.

JG: On another subject, you're giving some space at your conference to a group of bloggers who range from the anti-Zionist Max Blumenthal to the anti-Zionist Helena Cobban.

JB: There's a lunch. They've asked us that, since there is a lunch, can we have a room where we who are bloggers on this issue can sit and talk to each other? I mean, give me a break, I'm not giving them any approval whatsoever, and there's no sanction to their beliefs. I'm just saying, sure, there are seven free rooms on the floor, use one. I'm not going to say, "No you can't eat lunch together." I mean really.

JG: They're not eating lunch together. They're having a program.

JB: I don't even know what the program is. They can go into a room - wait, who's speaking?

JG: Helena Cobban and a bunch of others, I think.

JB: Oh man, come on, Jeffrey. I'm letting them have a room for lunch.

JG: Well you did reject a group of anti-Israel poets.

JB: That's because it was supposed to be a formal conference event and there is a red line we have, and that is about using the Holocaust and Holocaust imagery as a political football, and there is more than enough of that in the track records of these poets.

JG: Let me ask you something about something that you said to James Traub in The New York Times Magazine. You said that all of the people who work for you are intermarried and I was wondering --

JB: No, I never said that. I asked The Times for a retraction but they wouldn't give it. I never said that. What I said is that the young generation of Jews is a different generation, and all that. No one is intermarried in my office! No one on my staff is intermarried.

JG: So it's an inaccurate quote.

JB: An inaccurate quotation. Our staff is not intermarried. Not that that's a bad thing. There's nothing wrong with being intermarried.

JG: This is getting Seinfeldian here.

JB: There's nothing wrong with intermarriage. What's wrong with intermarriage?

JG: We're a small people--

JB: Right, but you know what I find? I find that most of my friends, and we're talking mid-to-late forties at this point, most of my friends who intermarried, their spouses either converted, or they're kids are being raised Jewish. What I find so fascinating about my intermarried friends is that they're searching for welcoming Jewish communities. So let's make ourselves a welcoming community.

JG: Look, I have that sadness of 'Oh, why are you leaving?' but I also recognize that you may as well just open up the door and say, "Come on in."

JB: The fastest answer to the shrinking Jewish population is to welcome in all of these spouses.

JG: It's good for the gene pool, too.

JB: It's incredibly good for the whole community. I think to put forward the notion that intermarriage is bad is exactly the kind of unwelcoming feeling that this community gives off to this generation.

JG: I don't think it should be phrased as bad or good. I think that marrying someone Jewish should be considered a positive thing, and we should be able to say that we'd like you to marry Jewish people or marry someone who wants to be Jewish and join the Jewish community.

JB: Right, continuing the Jewish community and keeping the Jewish people alive. Let me say, because I married the daughter of a cantor, so I'm totally in the Jewish community here, but I wanted to marry someone I loved. That's my first criteria. That's what I want my kids to do. What I would like them to do is to feel that when they marry and they have kids, that they will be welcome in Jewish communities and that they'll want to be a part of this community and they'll want to raise their kids in this community. I actually don't think it is fair to put anything on the kids and on this generation about who they marry. What we want them to do is retain the sense of community and identity and bring them into the fold.

JG: I think we've become seriously diverted. So, what do you think accounts for the cessation of rocket attacks into Israel from Gaza since the Israeli army incursion?

JB: You mean the 250 rockets that have come since then? It's not a cessation. When there was a ceasefire for four and a half months, from June until early November of last year, there were zero rockets. So if you're to compare actually which strategy provides zero rockets, a negotiated ceasefire is actually the strategy. (**UPDATE:** Please see this post for a clarification about the number of rocket attacks that took place during the cease-fire.)

JG: Do you think Israel should be negotiating with Hamas?

JB: That's up to Israel to decide. The one thing I feel very strongly about is that we should not, as a Jewish community or as a U.S. government, prevent Israel from negotiating with Hamas. And in fact, if there is a Palestinian unity government, and you keep hearing rumblings about this, that we shouldn't prevent the Israelis from dealing with a unity government that brings the Palestinians back together, because if we're really going to have peace, there has to be unification.

JG: Why are some congressmen and senators dropping out of the list that you put together of conference co-sponsors?

JB: Well, I think that the biggest problem that J Street has actually been created to solve is the political atmosphere on Capitol Hill. Our mission is to change the dynamics of American politics when it comes to Israel and the Middle East. This process by which one Republican partisan operative has scared five of the six Republicans off of our host committee--

JG: You're talking about Michael Goldfarb?

JB: It has scared people who don't know enough about who we are. We're only 18-months-old, we only have four lobbyists, we haven't met every member of Congress personally. There's a general sense that we are moving in the right direction, that this is a rational and sane set of views that is actually the mainstream of American foreign policy and of the Jewish community, but it's early days for us, and people don't know us 100 percent. So they get a call from a Republican operative telling them you just signed up on the list of a group that is anti-Israel and pro-Hamas. And they're like, 'Wait a minute! I didn't do that.'

JG: Go to one more thing. You once said Israel is treating Palestinians in a way that forces them to become terrorists. Could you go into that a little bit more?

JB: Well, let's really take a step back. Ehud Barak, in 1999, when he was running for prime minister, said "If I was a young kid growing up in the Palestinian territories, I'd probably be a terrorist, too." There is a sense of hopelessness, there's a sense of a lack of future in the Palestinian territories and particularly in Gaza. When an Israeli kid grows up, he wants to launch the next big start-up, they want to make a billion dollars by having an IPO out of their garage, by having the next great idea, right? In Gaza, the kids are growing up wanting to be the next great suicide bomber, and that's where martyrdom comes in, that's where fame comes, that's where family honor comes from, because there's no other path. So we have to recognize that this is a part of the climate in the Palestinian territories. This is not blaming Israel for terrorism.

JG: Well, it is.

JB: No, it's not blaming--

JG: Israel is creating conditions for the Palestinians to become terrorists, you're saying.

JB: In order to solve a problem, you must be able to rationally analyze its causes and discuss the best solutions. And if we can't have an open and an honest conversation about the role that the conditions in which kids are growing up in the territories plays in their development and what they're growing up to be, then we're not going to solve the problem. I'm not casting blame. This is a terrible conflict and there is really absolute hatred and anger about suicide bombing and rockets and terrorism and violence -- that is not the way to achieve your hopes and your dreams and your aspirations, and I condemn it and we condemn it, but that's not enough to really solve the problem. And then I can just close up the doors and say, 'Well we solved the problem because we condemn the tactics of the other side' -- no, we actually have to solve the problem, so we say, 'Okay, let's talk about the problem.'

JG: Loop back finally to this one because I want to make sure it's clear. At the point that negotiations aren't working, and the administration thinks it's in part Israel's fault, and someone in American society says, you know what, if they don't do what we're asking them to do, maybe we should just condition their military aid on participation in this process. Would you ever support that? If it really became clear to you that the Israelis were the recalcitrant party in this, and that Obama chewed their ears off for hours and nothing worked, would you support taking actual legislative steps to pressure Israel to come to the table?

JB: No is the first word of the answer. I don't think that it will ever come to that. I think that there are enough people in Israel who share the basic worldview -- Tzipi Livni just sent us a very warm letter of welcome and congratulations.

JG: But she's not coming, though.

JB: Right, well, it's a long journey to come and say hello for the leader of the opposition, and I understand that. She sent a very warm letter. This is what she stands for, the basic positions of J Street are positions that can command majority support in the Israeli population. Now I understand that there is a great deal of conflicted thinking within the Israeli population. You can get a majority, an overwhelming majority to support military solutions, you can get a majority as well to support diplomatic ones, so I think we're--

JG: People are complicated.

JB: And confused. Look, it's a difficult and confusing situation with very little sense of hope, and I think that if the U.S. and the world community and the Arab League can come together and put on the table a proposal that is eminently reasonable, that you would agree with, that I would agree with, I don't think that it's ever going to get to the point where you actually need that kind of legislative action or that kind of risk to the alliance. In fact, you probably need the strength of that alliance to give the Israelis the

assurance that they can make this kind of a risk for peace. It's actually counterproductive -- if you're willing to put the aid at risk, then you're actually giving an argument to the other side, that Israel has no lifeline, we can't--

JG: Right, that Israel's got to hunker down.

JB: I think tactically it's a huge mistake, but I don't think we're ever going to get to that point.

JG: Are you surprised, pleased, unhappy with the level of controversy that this conference is obviously generating in the Jewish universe?

JB: I'll differentiate between quality and quantity. I'm very pleased about the controversy. One of the goals of J Street is to open up debate and discussion on these issues, to be able to talk about some very difficult things openly, that there are a lot of people who would prefer you not to talk openly. So the fact that this is actually getting such play means we're actually fulfilling our mission, so I think that is terrific. What I'm not happy about is that I think it is very bad for our community, very bad for the Jewish people, that some of those who don't want us to be having this conversation have gone over the line in the way in which they personally attacked and used lies and smears to try to make their point.

JG: Lenny Ben-David and others have actually been doing you a favor in a kind of way by identifying the donors he doesn't like as Arabs rather than as opponents of Israel.

JB: Right, and they're not opponents of Israel. That's his problem, they actually aren't.

JG: But they're by no means Zionists. Helena Cobban, who is going to be speaking on this blogger panel, is close to a one-stater, as far as I can tell.

JB: J Street officially will not use the term "One-State Solution." That is an oxymoron because it is a one-state nightmare. That is the thing we are most opposed to -- moving in a one-state direction.

JG: A nightmare for practical reasons or a nightmare for moral reasons?

JB: A nightmare for the Jewish people. There would be no more Israel. One state is not a solution, one state is a dissolution.

JG: The thing I'm worried about with the conference is that I think most of your supporters are well-meaning, left-of-center Jews who love Israel and are tortured by the various dilemmas, who do stay awake at night worrying about this. But there are others who are glomming on to you guys as a cover, just using you to advance another agenda entirely.

JB: I hope that we have a very strong left flank that attacks us, that Jewish Voice for Peace and other groups that are consistently upset with us for backing Howard Berman's

sanctions plan and for refusing to embrace the Goldstone report and for standing up for the right of Israel to defend itself or for its military aid -- I hope we get attacked from the left because I would characterize J Street as the mainstream of the American Jewish community.

JG: You believe that you're at the center of American Jewish thought?

JB: I believe that we are at the center. The Marty Peretzes and the Michael Goldfarbs and the Lenny Ben-Davids are on the right, to the far right, and there are people to our left, and we are in the middle trying to put forward a thoughtful, moderate, mainstream point of view about how to save Israel as a Jewish home.

the Atlantic

Anti-Zionists and the J Street Conference

Jeffery Goldberg

October 22, 2009

http://jeffreygoldberg.theatlantic.com/archives/2009/10/anti-zionists_and_the_j_street.php

Bernard Avishai, the prominent author and an important member of J Street, is teed off at me for calling him an anti-Zionist. He writes on TPMCafe:

I am just about to board a plane for the US, so I am unable to answer this remarkably ill-informed (and, under the circumstances, vicious) shot from Jefferey (sic) Goldberg: the idea that he cannot go to the J Street conference because "some of [its] most important supporters -- Bernard Avishai comes to mind -- don't even believe in the idea of a Jewish state." I would simply ask readers to consider this post, or this, or this interview. Or just watch this lecture on You Tube. Goldberg has, alas, started to speak about "the idea of a Jewish state" a little like the way FOX News celebs talk about "America." Complexity is for sissies. Very sad. When he was at the New Yorker, his work on the settlers was the best there was.

First, I should thank him for the compliment. Thank you, Bernie. Second, I never stated that I "cannot go to the J Street conference because some its most important supporters.... don't even believe in the idea of a Jewish state." What I wrote was this, in a separate post: "I'm sorry I'm going to miss this conference." That's it. I can't imagine how Avishai came up with this fevered claim that I am boycotting J Street. In fact, Jeremy Ben-Ami, the head of J Street, asked me to speak at the conference, and I told him I would if I could, but I'm supposed to be out of town on a reporting trip. I'd be very happy to go. In fact, and I'm trying to change my schedule around so that I could at least attend the meeting and see what's going on.

On the more important question of Zionism and anti-Zionism, all I think I need to say is this: Avishai, the author of a book called "The Tragedy of Zionism," believes that Israel's Law of Return should be repealed. This is the law that grants Jews anywhere in the world to claim citizenship in the newly-reconstituted Jewish state, which was meant to be a refuge for persecuted Jews. The law is the *raison d'etre* of Zionism, and of Israel's existence. I don't think I was being "vicious" in pointing out that Avishai's conception of what Israel should be is very different from the mainstream Zionist position. By the way, J Street's position, as officially enunciated by its head flack to me, is that the group's core mission is to preserve Israel as a "Jewish democracy." Though maybe I should ask J

Street if it believes the Law of Return as currently written and implemented is undemocratic.

THE Nation.

A New Generation Rises at J Street

By *Britt Harwood*

October 29, 2009

<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20091116/harwood>

Rachel Jones spent the past week in Washington, DC, at the first annual conference for the new progressive Jewish organization J Street. She was passing out literature for Meretz USA, an American nonprofit that supports the platform of one of Israel's most left-wing political parties.

Politically and socially, Meretz USA is a far cry from Jones's upbringing as a devout Jew in small-town Iowa. The only story Jones, now 24, heard while growing up in her tiny community--a story she now calls "right wing"--was that Israel's borders included Gaza, the West Bank and the Golan Heights, and that Jewish identity was staked on the country's defense.

Her transformation from a conservative Zionist to a J Street volunteer is a product of the two years she spent in Israel. "I came to it from such a place of love and admiration and desire, and I wanted to just be completely embraced by my homeland, and all these romantic and idealistic pictures of what Israel was supposed to be for me," she said. But instead of finding her "homeland," Jones found the 2006 Lebanon war. The violence she witnessed deeply challenged her religious faith and her confidence in Israel's actions.

The conflict between a love of Israel and a desire for peace was the dominant theme of J Street's much-anticipated inaugural conference, held October 25-28 at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Washington. The conference hosted an unexpectedly large crowd of more than 1,500 mostly left-leaning Jewish activists. At the opening plenary session on Sunday night, Jeremy Ben-Ami, J Street's executive director, stated that J Street's role was to "widen the tent" of positions on Israel that can be called "pro-Israel." "In this room of over 1,000 people there are doubtless 1,000 opinions on the issues," he announced, and all the opinions were welcome--so welcome, in fact, that the leadership of J Street has been slow to solidify the new lobby's stances on certain crucial questions. J Street supports a two-state solution in Israel, one based on 1967 borders, and it wants to take a "pragmatic" approach to peace that avoids the static conservatism of AIPAC; but it has not gotten behind any specific timetables or policies.

Throughout four days of discussion panels, the conference covered topics like the Israeli settlements, Iran, human rights and the relationship of various US constituencies to Israel. In spite of some notable absences--Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren declined his invitation--there were nearly 100 speakers on hand, including left-leaning Israeli Knesset members, former US Ambassador Martin Indyk, US Representative Robert Wexler, Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami, Senator Chuck Hagel and National Security

Advisor Jim Jones. Even Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, who has been publicly critical of J Street, decided in a change of heart to speak at the conference.

Beyond the hard politics, the J Street conference was also a fledgling effort to help define the way Rachel Jones and her rising generation of American Jews will identify and engage with Judaism and Israel. Davidi Gilo, president of J Street's board of directors, had hardly opened the conference on Sunday night before he stressed, "I want to extend a special welcome to our young generation...who are seeking a voice that allows them to stand taller when speaking about Israel on campuses." Along with 250 college students who were there to participate in a parallel conference organized by J Street U (J Street's campus activism branch), there were dozens of twenty-something political staffers, think-tank interns and bloggers scattered throughout the crowd.

The few hundred young faces were a welcome sign for J Street leadership and other representatives of older generations of Jews. In the past few years, studies have shown that youth engagement with Judaism and Israel is declining. And as Daniel Sokatch, CEO of the New Israel Fund, cautioned the audience, "This is a time when many Jews, especially young ones, are walking away from a life that involves Israel." In many cases, younger Jews represent what Ben-Ami calls a new "silent majority," who have felt until now that voicing critical opinions of Israel would expose them to harassment and accusations of anti-Semitism or self-loathing. "Young Jews have no forum to question," Lauren Barr, a college junior, observed. "And so they walk away."

Rabbi Andy Bachman, an opening session speaker, dated the generational divide to 1967, when the Six Day War initiated Israel's occupation of the West Bank. "Whether you were born before or after 1967 really matters here," he said. "If you think about the generations that have grown up since 1967, they see an Israel that is defined only as an occupying nation."

Sarah Turbow, a senior at Yale, and Aimee Mayer, a senior at the University of Maryland, both agreed. "I saw the [Palestinian] wall before I saw the Wailing Wall," Turbow told me. In spite of her family's close connection to early Israeli history, Turbow's view of Israel has to incorporate both pride and informed criticism of Israel's actions during her lifetime. Mayer, who is the president of her campus's J Street U chapter and a member of the national student board, thinks this is why younger Jews are increasingly joining progressive campus groups. "They see it as a human rights issue," she said. "Our generation grew up talking about tolerance and diversity far more than our parents' generation did."

J Street U trains student leaders in old advocacy techniques like letter-writing campaigns, campus dialogues and educational programming; its current approach to youth engagement relies heavily on the hope that new interest can be generated for old political tactics. But can letter-writing campaigns keep up with the Twitterverse? The number of next-gen Jews who registered to attend the J Street conference was in the hundreds; but thousands of young people followed live-blogging from Jewschool.com writers, or

tracked the Twitter feed by searching for J Street's hashtag (a number used to tag any Tweets that relate to a certain subject). Ben-Ami opened an audience discussion session by projecting J Street's Twitter feed onto large screens and inviting audience members to live-Tweet their thoughts. J Street has benefited from the blogosphere's interest in the new lobby, but it is unclear whether the exposure has materialized in the form of new membership or political mobilization.

Jewish media outlets like Jewcy.com, Jewschool.com and JDub Records are creating forums for Jewish discussion where traditional institutions fall short. Jewcy.com--which Lilit Marcus, the web magazine's 27-year-old editor, described as "like the Huffington post except Jewish"--was an official media partner at the conference; its involvement enabled tens of thousands of viewers to watch live webcasts of the keynote speeches on its site. It also set up a table at the conference where participants could use FlipCams and free laptops to do citizen reporting on Jewcy.com.

Marcus thinks the Internet is providing community for young Jews who feel its absence. "I grew up in Raleigh," Marcus said. "And I was lucky enough that I came of age in a generation where we had Internet access, and I was able to go online and find sites like Jewcy... And I finally felt like, there may not be a community where I live, but that doesn't mean I have to be outside of this." Jacob Harris, the 29-year-old COO of the Jewish record and event company JDub, thinks that younger Jews are plugging into a culture that allows them to draw their identity from as many sources as they choose. He noted that while young Jews' parents and grandparents more often found their group identity defined by physical spaces--whether at the local Jewish Community Center or the synagogue--younger people "can Twitter at this conference and feel Jewish, or feel connected to Israel."

J Street has begun to embrace this changing definition of community, and it has already served as a forum to allow diverse people to meet and share ideas. To Rachel Jones, J Street felt like home. "This is definitely the first time I've felt embraced by a community that feels similarly to me," she said, "about what Israel is supposed to be, about what it is now, and about what it can be in the future." For young Jews sifting through the complex landscape of political identities, it can be good to have a place, physical or digital, to go.

Dispatch from J Street

By Antony Loewenstein

October 30, 2009

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/antony-loewenstein/dispatch-from-j-street_b_339853.html

The Obama administration's National Security Adviser General James Jones told the "pro-Israel and pro-peace" Israel lobby J Street this week that America believes "Israeli security and peace are inseparable." The comment received a wild cheer, although similar comments were made during the Bush years.

The over 1500 delegates to the first J Street national conference in Washington DC -- a broad collection of Zionists, peace activists, students, anti-Zionists, pensioners and the curious -- came from around the world to engage on issues related to the Israel/Palestine conflict.

Although the organization's establishment spreads a conservative agenda -- the two state solution and pressure on Iran's suspected nuclear program -- the hard-line Zionist community attacked the group for not being sufficiently close to the government of Benjamin Netanyahu.

J Street was smeared for being disloyal, anti-Israel, pro-terrorist and pro-Palestinian. The Israeli Ambassador to America Michael Oren expressed "concerns" about unspecified "policies" of the 18-month old institution. J Street was framed as an upstart daring to challenge Israeli policies, including opposition to the December/January Gaza onslaught.

The conference had a schizophrenic, identity crisis. On the one hand, Executive Director Jeremy Ben-Ami clearly outlined before the event the lines his group would not cross -- a one-state solution was out of the question and withdrawing US military aid. Yet any number of sessions I attended featured concerned and dedicated Jews (with a handful of Palestinians and Arabs) challenging the tenets and morality of a Jewish state itself, the occupation of Palestinian land and the likelihood of Obama being able or willing to bring the warring parties together.

Post-Zionism was in the air, desperate to find a place in the acceptable boundaries of mainstream American Jewry. J Street may not be the space for this multi-cultural and multi-racial future to emerge. The concept of a "Jewish, democratic" state, with little discussion about the roughly 20 percent of Arabs citizens in Israel proper, permeated the official sessions across the three day event, but I heard nobody question how that outcome could satisfy non-Jews. Are they not welcome in this J Street vision and why would they want to live in a Zionist state when they are already profoundly discriminated against?

I sensed that many participants were keen to feel included in the debate, used to years of isolation in a Jewish establishment that only tolerates Zionist obedience. Stories of Gaza emerged (albeit on the sidelines), the occupation of Palestinian lands was acknowledged and the trauma of the ongoing settlement project in the West Bank was dissected. Details emerged here and there about placing faith in the Democratic Party but there seemed to be an almost unreal expectation that the Obama administration would be able to end the never-ending colonies growing like cancer across the Palestinian territories.

Virtually nothing has changed since Obama's inauguration and Palestinian lives remain tortured by checkpoints and humiliation. I saw it with my own eyes in July. Many J Street Jews were able to acknowledge the presence of an occupation -- an important step in the evolutionary process -- but with little understanding of the practical ramifications of this oppression being committed in their name and with billions of tax dollars in annual aid.

I was told by a number of sources that J Street was keen to avoid substantive discussion about Gaza and the effect of America's shunning of the democratically elected Hamas government. Democracy, claimed J Street officials, would emerge only when both Israelis and Palestinians felt comfortable trusting the other side. Such motherhood statements emerged in the 1990s during the Oslo peace process when both parties were placed on an equal playing field when, in fact, the Palestinians were under occupation.

The situation has only worsened since then. The occupation -- and its effect on young American Jewry -- is clear. Subjugating another people comes with a price but ending it requires more than tough speeches by Obama.

J Street is attempting to play the Washington game, a dangerous position to take when facts on the ground in Palestine don't gel with the concept of a "Jewish, democratic state." An unofficial bloggers' event at this week's conference, featuring writer Max Blumenthal and Mondoweiss founder Philip Weiss, allowed freer talk over the hot, Jewish issues. The small, crowded room buzzed with the opportunity to dissect the UN Goldstone report -- the only time I heard the Jewish, South African judge praised for daring to investigate gross human rights abuses in Gaza -- settlement activity on the West Bank and challenging conservative critics who only accept blind support of the Jewish state; insecurity masquerading as strength.

The J Street event was undoubtedly a watershed in the American, Jewish community. Political influence is the aim and Obama is the leader. If he fails, founder Ben-Ami couldn't tell me what would happen. "Israelis will have to decide", he said, implying that apartheid is the only alternative, a reality that exists today for millions in the West Bank and Gaza.

I arrived a cynic and left a skeptic. Social progress occurred this week and countless Jews met to respectfully engage the major issues of their lives. Even the growing boycott, divestment and boycott campaign against Israel was mentioned and analyzed. J Street must decide what it wants to be -- a wide tent that allows virtually every Jewish opinion

on Israel or an orthodoxy that pushes only conventional platitudes -- but the Palestinians don't have time to wait.

Jewish angst is ultimately not enough to bring peace with justice to both Israelis and Palestinians.



MuzzleWatch

Tracking efforts to stifle open debate about US-Israeli foreign policy.

J Street Welcomes You

Sydney Levy

October 26, 2009

<http://www.muzzlewatch.com/2009/10/26/j-street-welcomes-you/>

The J Street Conference opened yesterday, with over 1,000 people at the table.

The first plenary session was hosted by Jeremy Ben-Ami (J Street) and Daniel Sokatch (New Israel Fund). Jeremy started by reading letters of support from Israeli President Shimon Peres and Israeli opposition leader, Tsipi Livni — a tacit response to the Israeli Ambassador to the US, who had decided to boycott the conference; apparently the Ambassador only goes to AIPAC dinners and the like.

Jeremy and Daniel have both been the target of attacks from the right: Jeremy at J Street and Daniel at his previous post at the San Francisco Federation. In Daniel's case:

Sokatch found himself smack in the middle of a melee over San Francisco's Jewish film festival when its organizers decided to screen a film about Rachel Corrie, the pro-Palestinian activist who was killed when she lay down in front of an Israeli bulldozer about to raze Palestinian homes, and invite Corrie's mother to speak at the event without presenting other viewpoints. That was not Sokatch's doing and he publicly criticized the decision to invite only Corrie's mother to speak (a pro-Israel speaker was added later). But the backlash fell squarely on his shoulders.

More recently, Sokatch irked some leaders of the San Francisco community when he agreed to speak at the annual conference of J Street, a new organization that has lobbied for U.S. pressure on Israel (and the Palestinians) and criticized Israel's invasion of Gaza.

It should come as no surprise then, that when they both spoke publicly yesterday, they seemed to have been borrowing a page from Muzzlewatch. Jeremy talked about *widening the tent*, about *respect and tolerance for others*. He welcomed *everyone* to the conference.

(Everyone, except for disinvited poets Josh Healey and Kevin Coval)

Daniel looked at the audience and added, *We are not the margins of our community, we are the mainstream... Nobody has a monopoly of what it means to be pro-Israel.*

Jeremy affirmed that the creation of a Palestinian state is a core pro-Israel position.

It was a good opening night. The question remains whether those that are *both* pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian will fit into this wider tent.



J Street: "We Are Winning"

October 16, 2009

http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/10/16/j_street_we_are_winning

The debate in Washington over the Jewish-American role in U.S.-Israel policy is at a fever pitch, as the new and controversial organization called J Street is reeling from the loss of support of several members of Congress who have backed away from the group under pressure from its detractors.

In recent days, eight congressmen have removed themselves from the list of "hosts" for J Street's gala dinner on Oct. 27, which is being headlined by Obama's National Security Advisor James L. Jones and Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry, D-MA.

Rep. Jane Harman isn't one of them. Earlier today, The Cable caught up with the California Democrat, who said she would not be attending but hadn't removed herself from the list.

"I believe that different voices should be heard and that was the impetus for my lending my name to the list," Harman told The Cable, quickly adding, "That's the extent of my involvement with J Street." (Harman has a storied history with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the most powerful Jewish lobbying group on Capitol Hill, and a strong Jewish-American constituency.)

All the 150-plus members on the list are being targeted by a campaign by right-wing bloggers, questioning their involvement with J Street and pressuring them to back out. More lawmakers are expected to drop their endorsements for the conference in the coming days.

J Street, which markets itself as "pro-Israel and pro-peace," responded today with an e-mail blast accusing the Weekly Standard, an influential neoconservative magazine, of using a "classic Swift Boat move" and "thuggish scare tactics" to undermine the conference.

In an interview, J Street head Jeremy Ben Ami pointed the finger directly at Weekly Standard blog editor and former John McCain staffer Michael Goldfarb as the instigator of the campaign.

"It is the modus operandi of some on the right in the Jewish community who will engage in scare tactics to enforce their message discipline and that is what J Street was created to change," he said.

Goldfarb says his campaign to disrupt the conference planning is far from over. "J Street should stop whining," he told The Cable, "They got their 'pro-peace' buddies in the White House to help them stop the bleeding -- but it won't work."

The 18-month-old J Street is meant to be a counterweight to AIPAC, which has dominated the Israel discussion in Washington since its inception in the 1950s. Ben Ami deflected any contention that AIPAC is pressuring lawmakers to drop out of the event, as some are contending, and AIPAC has strenuously denied any involvement.

A spokesman for Israeli Amb. Michael Oren, who declined an invitation to attend the event, said this week that J Street's actions could "impair Israeli interests." J Street countered by publishing an open letter in the Jerusalem Post inviting Oren to speak at the conference, but he has not responded.

Those removing their names from the list include leading senators such as Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., Kristin Gillibrand, D-NY, Thad Cochran, R-MS, and Sen. Blanche Lincoln, D-AK, and Reps. Mike Castle, R-DE (who is running for the Senate) Mike Rogers, R-MI, Michael McCaul, R-TX, and Leonard Boswell, D-IA.

Several of the lawmakers claim they were added without their knowledge, but Ben Ami said J Street had received assurances from every congressional office on its gala host list and it's not the group's fault if some staffers didn't communicate with their bosses.

Aaron David Miller, a former Middle East peace negotiator now with the Wilson Center, said that the whole J Street controversy is just "Jewish inside baseball" fueled by a lack of a coherent and comprehensive national policy toward Israel.

"In the end it does very little to serve the Jewish community in the United States and nothing to serve U.S. national interests," he said of the controversy.

But Ben Ami says the public spectacle over the conference is exactly what J Street wants.

"We are at the center of debate and controversy after only 18 months, and this is a real impact and a success," he said, adding, "We are winning."

Jewish Americans Turn Out in Droves for J Street

Eileen White Read

October 26, 2009

<http://trueslant.com/eileenread/2009/10/26/jewish-americans-turn-out-in-droves-for-j-street/>

WASHINGTON, DC – The hardest things to accomplish at the first annual J Street conference here today were the basics: Finding a seat in one of the many seminars and speeches, navigating the throngs to get from one meeting to the next, lining up for coffee. The young liberal political advocacy organization, avowedly pro-Israel and pro-peace, was blessed with abundance: 1,500 overwhelmingly Jewish participants showed up – 50% more than had registered.

Even without the crowds, the fact that the J Street meeting happened at all is considered an indicator of success. The Obama administration's National Security Advisor Jim Jones will speak tomorrow. Letters of support came in from Kadima Party leader Tzipi Livni and Israeli President and Nobel Laureate Shimon Peres, who wrote: "The Israel that reaches out its hand in peace is not only an Israel that addresses a geo-political reality and discharges its strategic interests; it is an Israel that acts according to the commands of the conscience and values of the Jewish people." But the speakers' list showed the effect of right wing groups that had been sending letters and faxes to members of Congress for months, urging them not to participate: Both New York Senators, who were expected to participate, bowed out, as did Massachusetts Senator John Kerry. Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren also declined to join this large gathering of Jewish Americans, though he is a Jewish American and was a Georgetown University professor until resigning his American citizenship to become an ambassador just a few months ago.

Did anyone miss Oren, who has chosen to "leave" the U.S. for a coalition government of the right, the settler-right and the ultra-religious-right? Not that I noticed. Just about one year ago 79% of American Jewish voters cast their ballots for Barack Obama, and their liberal values were very much in evidence here today – the difference being that these folks don't usually get to focus their human-rights and peace-loving lenses on the state of Israel. As Jo-Ann Mort put it, "American Jewry remains the most liberal organized entity in American public life. We embrace ideals like human rights, pluralism and diversity. We cling to democracy as a way to defend our own rightful place in America's polity. And these are the values we want to see—but don't—in the Israel so many of us love."

Many of the people I met today are activists either in their own clubs, temples, or human and civil-rights organizations – both in the U.S. and Israel. They seemed overwhelmingly pleased to be able to get together and share their views, as they so deeply share values – and without fear of being labelled anti-semitic by their friends or colleagues on the right. "I've never felt more marginalized than this year, with the high percentage of the

Israeli public who supported the Gaza war, who support attacking Iran,” said Rabbi Arik Ascherman, who heads an organization known as Rabbis for Human Rights.

The national politicians who did show up included Democrats Steve Cohen of Tennessee, Bob Filner of California, Jared Polis of Colorado, and Jan Schakowsky of Illinois – who said she had received phone calls from “other organizations” urging her not to participate “for my own good.” She denounced the veiled threats: “Being united in support Israel should not preclude a vigorous debate,” to thunderous applause. She added:

“When people in the administration are called self-hating Jews, this is not in Israel’s interest. If the line is so very narrow, we begin to exclude people....A member of the Congressional Black Caucus had a meeting with some members of the Jewish community in his district. They expressed concern about Jewish children from bomb, and he expressed concern about Palestinian children. They said there was no moral equivalency. He objected to that..... He found himself in the local Jewish newspaper in a photo that looked like a wanted poster.”

Rep. Filner, too, said he was unintimidated by phone calls from individuals saying, “I thought you were Jewish, and I’m not going to give you any more campaign contributions.”

Only one Republican showed up, Rep. Charles Boustany of Louisiana, saying that “controversy’s good; it can be invigorating.” “Fear of the new and fear of this competition is what this blowback is all about.”



J Street & Its Fellow Travelers

October 29, 2009

http://www.ou.org/public_affairs/article/60287

To much media hoopla, the J Street organization's conference has come and gone and we have but one point to raise for folks to consider.

In advance of the conference, J Street's leader, Jeremy Ben Ami, laid out his views on the key issues of the day to The Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg. Ron Kampeas rounded up the resulting criticism of Ben Ami in the left-wing blogosphere which foreshadowed the incidents of conference attendees booing Rabbi Eric Yoffie and panelist Matt Yglesias being surprised to see that there were conference attendees who did not wish to be associated with being "pro-Israel."

The commentators on the Bible teach that in the exodus from Egypt, with Pharaoh's empire in ruins, many non-Jews traveled out with Moses and "the winning team." They are known as the "erev rav" - literally a "mixed multitude." The sages ascribe to these "fellow travelers" the cause for many of the sins of the Jews (most notably constructing the golden calf) as they traveled through the desert to the land of Israel.

Many commentators, not necessarily hostile to J Street, have noted that J Street's leadership has sent mixed messages about its commitments and positions. Having put themselves on the map, they now must make some real choices about who they are and whether they will define or be defined by their erev rav.



Doing the Jones, or in which I get a little too deep into the weeds

Ron Kampeas

October 28, 2009

<http://blogs.jta.org/politics/article-ambush/2009/10/28/1008812/doing-the-jones-or-in-which-i-get-a-little-too-deep-into-the-weeds#comments>

James Jones, the White House national security adviser, may one day lend his name to a Middle Eastern confessional version of the "full Ginsburg," named for the Monica Lewinsky lawyer who scored all five Sunday talk shows, the same Sunday.

The "full Jones" (okay, yes, it sounds a little icky) would involve speaking to two Arab American and two Jewish American groups in a single month. James Jones has delivered what I imagine to be pretty much the same speech -- in general outlines -- this month to AIPAC, J Street, the American Task Force on Palestine and now the Arab American Institute.

I'm familiar with all but the speech he gave AIPAC's National Summit, in San Diego -- the AAI folks just sent over the speech he delivered to their Leadership Summit on Monday.

The speeches are tweaked to the news of the day -- the J Street and AAI speeches this week include references to efforts to persuade Iran to give up its low enriched uranium for further enrichment to medical research levels. And, naturally, J Streeters get more of the Israeli-Palestinian equation, and of the close U.S.-Israel relationship, while Arab Americans -- predominantly Lebanese -- hear a commitment to Lebanon's independence.

And there are other differences -- in passages that otherwise transfer word for word from one audience to another, but so slight they might be meaningless. But I can't resist digging for the possible parse.

There are at least two between his J Street and AAI speeches:

--In reaffirming to the AAI group the president's expectations of the Israelis and the Palestinians, he leaves out "incitement," which he included among the Palestinian obligations in his J Street speech. Here's the passage from the AAI speech (the full text is below):

For Israel, these steps have included stopping settlement growth, dismantling outposts, and improving access and movement in the West Bank. For the Palestinians, it has meant continuing efforts on security and reforming the institutions of governance. And for the Arab states, it has

meant reaching out to Israel to demonstrate the benefits of the Arab Peace Initiative, as Israel takes steps towards peace.

Same thing in his speech to AAFP:

For Israel, these steps have included stopping settlement growth, dismantling outposts and improving access and movement in the West Bank. For the Palestinians, it has meant continuing efforts on security and reforming the institutions of governance. And for the Arab states, it has meant reaching out to Israel to demonstrate the benefits of the Arab Peace Initiative as Israel takes steps towards peace.

But this is what he tells J Street:

For the Palestinians this means continuing efforts on security **combatting incitement** and refining their instruments of governance. For the Arab states it means reaching out to Israel to show that they are prepared to live in peace and demonstrate the benefits of the Arab Peace Initiative. And for Israel these steps have included stopping settlement growth, dismantling outposts and improving access to the movement and reviving economic conditions in the West Bank.

I don't have a link, but here's the J Street video:

--The other difference: In both speeches, to AAI and J Street, Jones cites efforts to contain Iran. No surprise: This as much an issue for Arabs as it is for Jews, and particularly for Christian Lebanese (most Arab Americans are of Christian Lebanese origin) who, one might imagine, shudder at the prospect of a Hezbollah emboldened by an Iran with the bomb.

At J Street, though, he said "Nothing is off the table," code for the prospect of military action should all else fail to dissuade the regime from suspending its suspected nuclear program. Not at AAI. (He does not mention Iran in his AAFP speech.)

Why? Well, possibly because Palestinians and their backers perceive demands to stop "incitement" the same way Israelis see Palestinian demands for a "total" settlement freeze -- as an absolutist and disingenuous demand; towns, villages and cities can never truly "freeze" and government-paid imams and broadcasters will never truly be muzzled. Both sides would likely welcome good faith leaps, and not absolutes -- but both sides insist that the other side is sticking to absolutes. So the demands become irritants.

And, when it comes to Iran, Arab nations (and presumably, their diasporas) are known to long for containment -- but, even more, to fear another war and its repercussions.

More mysterious -- and deserving of examination, unless, like I said, I'm getting obsessive -- is why Jones would include these chestnuts of traditional pro-Israel appeals

to J Street? I'm not saying J Street isn't pro-Israel, but the folks in that hall were not, I'd guess, too exercised by Palestinian incitement, nor do they tend to favor sabre-rattling toward Iran.

Was he pitching to the AIPAC and Israeli government observers he knew to be in the room? Or -- and I'm getting a little meta here -- was he telling J Street, you know, maybe these are issues you *ought* to care about?

Full AAI speech below the jump...



Pro-Israel, Pro-Peace

By Matthew Yglesias

October 27, 2009

<http://yglesias.thinkprogress.org/archives/2009/10/pro-israel-pro-peace.php>

I was debating with Jon Chait at a J Street panel this morning on the subject of “what does it mean to be pro-Israel?” As expected, we disagreed on a number of points, most of which I was right on and he was wrong on. But one thing he said in his opening remarks that I really disagreed with was that there was an ambiguity running through the J Street constituency as to whether the group was or should be pro-Israel at all.

That just struck me as kind of nuts. My J Street button said “Pro-Israel, Pro-Peace.” It’s not a subtle aspect of the messaging. But when we moved to the Q&A time it became clear that a number of people in the audience really were quite uncomfortable self-defining as “pro-Israel” in any sense and that others are uncomfortable with the basic Zionist concept of a Jewish national state. I was, of course, aware that those views existed but it had seemed to me that it was clear that that wasn’t what J Street is there to advocate for. Apparently, though, it wasn’t clear to everyone.

Which I think is interesting. Readers will know that I’m not a big fan of nationalism and I am a big fan of trans-national projects like the European Union and the United Nations. And it’s even true that I really kind of hope that hundreds of years from now there won’t be national states at all, instead we’ll all be lumped in with the Vulcans and the Andorians in a United Federation of Planets and off we’ll go. But there’s clearly no prospects for the abolition of the nation-state in the short-term. And the Jewish people’s claim to a nation-state is just as strong as the Finnish or Dutch or Thai claim. Or, for that matter, as the Palestinian claim. By far the best way to secure a just resolution of those conflicting claims is through a two-state solution—an independent Palestine, and a democratic Jewish Israel.

I completely grasp the pull of radical cosmopolitan values, but I think people who think that the area west of the Jordan River would be a great place to try implementing them in the short-term are being a bit crazy. It’s not even clear that Belgium or Canada will be able to survive as bi-national entities.

Jones to J Street: I'll be back

By Ron Kampeas

October 28, 2009

<http://blogs.jta.org/politics/article/2009/10/28/1008787/jones-to-j-street-ill-be-back>

The Obama administration launched J Street's first major conference this week with a "we have your back" message, and that's pretty much how it ended.

The closing message from the White House to the J Street conference was one of inevitability: Of peace, of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship -- and of J Street.

"You can be sure this administration will be represented at all future conferences," James Jones, the White House national security adviser, said during his keynoter on Tuesday.

Jones' message was otherwise boilerplate -- Israel, the Palestinians and the Arab states need to do more to achieve peace, President Obama is committed to a two state solution, Iran must stop enriching uranium -- although he added a new wrinkle to the Iran equation, making it clear that the United States expects Iran to give up all, not just some, of its low-enriched uranium for further enrichment as part of the major power's latest offer. (Some elements in Iran want to scrap the whole deal, others are suggesting relinquishing a portion of the LEU.)

And whereas the Bush administration fought among itself over whether "the road to Baghdad was through Jerusalem" or the reverse, Jones made it clear that this White House sees Israeli-Palestinian peace as a kind of end-all.

Here's the brief:

WASHINGTON (JTA) -- Advancing Israel-Palestinian peace is the "epicenter" of U.S. foreign policy, the White House national security adviser said.

"If there was one problem I could recommend to the president if he could solve one problem, this would be it," James Jones said Tuesday during an address to the first conference of J Street, the dovish, pro-Israel lobby. Bringing about an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement would create "ripples" around the world, Jones said. "The reverse is not true. This is the epicenter."

Jones also said that "Israeli security and peace in the Middle East are inseparable," an implied rebuke to Israel's foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, who wants to suspend peace talks.

Jones also addressed negotiations with Iran to suspend its suspected nuclear weapons program, saying that the United States expected Iran to

export its low-enriched uranium to Russia and then France for enrichment to medical research levels; Iran tentatively agreed to such a deal last month, but now appears to be reconsidering. Failure to comply with the demands of major powers will lead to "increased pressure," Jones said.

"We will see in a short amount of time" if Iran is cooperating, he said. "Nothing is off the table," he added, using the usual allusion to the threat of force and also saying that the United States had consulted closely with Israel on how to contain Iran.

Jones also outlined U.S. reasons for opposing the Goldstone report commissioned by the U.N. Human Rights Council, which charges Israel and Hamas with war crimes during last winter's Gaza war. Among these, he said, were its "overly broad recommendations," its failure to address the "asymmetric nature of the conflict," and "its sweeping conclusions of law." He called on Israel to investigate the claims in the report.

Jones' "I'll be back" assurance meant a lot to an organization that has scrambled to attract mainstream and right-wing speakers, amid a behind the scenes assault from some other pro-Israel groups and the right wing warning establishment figures away from the dovish pro-Israel lobby. It earned an extended round of applause.

It was echoed by U.S. Rep. Robert Wexler (D-Fla.), who introduced Jones. Wexler was -- until his recent announcement that he is quitting Congress to head a Middle East peace think tank -- about as mainstream as it gets in Congress' unofficial Jewish caucus. He was very strongly pro-Israel and his wife works for the American Jewish Committee.

But Wexler, who was Candidate Obama's lead Jewish outreach, remains loyal to Obama's insistence on broadening the dialogue. "As Americans, we are among the most fortunate people in the world," he told the crowd. "I applaud your political energy, we need more of it."



J Street pushing a policy that leads to disappointment

By Antony Leowenstein

October 30, 2009

<http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/10/30/j-street-pushing-a-policy-that-leads-to-disappointment/>

During this week's first J Street conference in Washington DC — a US-based, “pro-Israel and pro-peace” Israel lobby group that aims to widen the debate over the Middle East — an older woman stood up in a session titled “What does it mean to be pro-Israel?” and said: “I have the right to speak out when my tax dollars are backing Israel.” She argued that Jews have a responsibility to shape American policy toward the region, especially when the Jewish state occupies the Palestinians with Washington's approval.

In many ways J Street's conference was a watershed moment. The group's aims are conventional — a two-state solution and establishment of “Jewish, democratic state” alongside a viable Palestinian nation — but the wide variety of (mostly Jewish) attendees were not content to simply accept strict boundaries of debate. Zionists, students, pensioners, 1948 Jewish fighters, anti-Zionists and Nazi hunters congregated — more than 1500 people showed up — desperate to engage the key issues of the age.

I arrived a cynic but left a sceptic. The usual suspects abused J Street before the event, during the event and after the event. For these Zionist groups, blind devotion to Israel is the only acceptable way forward. It's clear, however, that many young Jews with whom I conversed didn't accept an unquestioning Judaism. They knew about the Gaza war and felt uncomfortable about it. They had spent some time in the West Bank and seen IDF soldiers abusing Palestinian children. They'd watched rampaging Jewish settlers attack Arabs. Real dissent was whispered every day, a post-Zionism was discussed, a boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign against Israel was analysed and a one-state solution was put on the table. J Street endorsed none of these ideas, however, although cheers were constantly heard from the crowd when the dignity of Palestinians was stated and accepted.

During an unofficial blogger's panel, attended by writer Max Blumenthal and blogger Philip Weiss, we discussed the ideas J Street didn't want in its official program. Jewish identity, a constantly evolving beast that often remains mired in Zionist myths, is in need of re-tuning. J Street executive director Jeremy Ben-Ami told me that he was all too aware that a growing number of young Jews were turning away from their religion and Israel, inter-marriage and disgust with Israeli policies leading to a 21st-century multiculturalism that leaves the Middle East in the hands of extremists and the most dedicated.

Historically, that has largely been hardline Zionists, settlers and Palestinian rejectionists. Although I fundamentally disagree with Ben-Ami's proscriptions — his recent interview with the *Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg was a sad reflection of what mainstream Jews supposedly need to say to please gate-keeper Zionists — J Street's conference was a relatively wide-tent socially, if not politically. It's unimaginable that AIPAC's annual conference would tolerate (or even attract) participants who wanted to debate a post-Zionist Israel. Former AIPAC head Neal Sher told me that the real test for J Street was translating the undeniable passion and energy this week into real political power, something AIPAC has perfected to a fine art.

The question remains: what are the boundaries of America debate over Israel and Palestine and who sets the limits? For many at J Street, nothing should be off the table. Ever.

Even during the keynote speech delivered by Barack Obama's national security adviser, Jim Jones — a largely sterile effort designed to show Washington's dedication to the Jewish state while mentioning Palestinians almost in passing — the word Gaza was uttered, albeit briefly. Occupation was condemned. Illegal settlements were hammered. Whether Obama has the will or interest to achieve any kind of negotiated settlement in the Middle East is highly doubtful but Jones at least acknowledged the importance of alternative Jewish views.

J Street officials expressed fear that Obama was the last, great hope to resolve the Israel/Palestine conflict and provided a platform for those who argued about the "demographic threat" (more Arabs than Jews in the land of Israel and Palestine, something happening as we speak). There is something fundamentally racist about calmly analysing the higher Arab birth-rate threatening to swamp Jewish lives. Imagine if white Australian parents worried about Aboriginal children "threatening" the purity of their children.

The ability of some Zionists to want a majority Jewish state is an inherent contradiction in the modern world; enjoy multiculturalism and its benefits in the West but desire racial purity in the state of Israel.

Australian Jewish leaders fear the importation of free debate. J Street's coming out conference fills them with dread. Perhaps a newer generation of Jews will not tolerate this orthodox approach. The alternative is simply idealising the state of Israel without daring to look beyond its white and sunny tourist image. Occupation isn't something to be ignored or defended. It has placed modern Judaism morally on its knees.

This week left me invigorated, enraged and disillusioned. J Street itself is pushing, in my view, a policy that will only lead to disappointment and continued occupation of Palestinian land. But the range of voices, arguments, disagreements and passions at the conference proves a vibrant Judaism is essential if Jews and Palestinians are to live peacefully together.

Antony Loewenstein is a journalist and author of My Israel Question and The Blogging Revolution.



J Street struts its stuff at first convention

By Richard Greenberg, Adam Kredo, Debra Rubin

October 29, 2009

<http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/40352/j-street-struts-its-stuff-at-first-convention/>

Ever since its inception some 18 months ago, the upstart Israel lobby J Street has made its mark by insisting that being pro-Israel and pro-peace is not an oxymoron.

That rallying cry, which has generated its share of controversy, has suddenly been amplified dramatically, although its progressive and prophetic message remains unchanged, according to the organization's executive director, Jeremy Ben-Ami.

"We've simply got ourselves a megaphone," he told more than 1,000 attendees at the Oct. 25 opening of J Street's much-anticipated inaugural conference.

The event itself, which ran through Oct. 28, provided the decibel boost by raising J Street's profile and signaling that a new geopolitical movement had, in fact, been born, according to Ben-Ami.

"This majority will be silent no more," he declared in his address.

The conference, which took place at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Washington, D.C., drew an estimated 1,500 attendees — by far the largest gathering of progressive, Israel-focused Jews in U.S. history, according to event organizers.

Microphone in hand, Rep. Charles Boustany (R-La.) speaks during an Oct. 27 panel discussion of members of Congress at the J Street conference. photo/jta/jstreet
The confab demonstrated that J Street offered a diverse and "mainstream" alternative to one camp that says "Israel is always right" and another that says "Israel is always wrong," Daniel Sokatch, CEO of the New Israel Fund, said during the Oct. 25 opening session.

Rather, Sokatch added, "we offer a critical third way for American Jews" to support Israel, one that focuses on a Jewish state in which there cannot be peace without justice for both Israel and its neighbors.

Moreover, the event offered a refuge for Jews who were born after Israel's victory in the 1967 war and therefore did not grow up with "that immediate visceral connection" to the Jewish state, Sokatch pointed out.

That generation includes Lauren Barr, a student at American University and a J Street intern, who said that “our society raised us to believe in tolerance and respect for others” and that “we’re taught to question everything — except for Israel.”

Those who balk at supporting the Jewish state, she said, “risk being called traitors,” yet “we cannot connect to an Israel that denies accountability.”

Israel, Barr added, “needs us to serve, to use our energy, our enthusiasm and our determination to come up with a fresh approach.”

The conference featured soul-searching panel discussions in which participants grappled painstakingly with thorny issues, as well as exuberant pep rally-type exhortations.

Although emotions ran high, they did not always translate into unequivocal support for conference speakers.

For example, during his address Oct. 26, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, drew isolated boos as well as hearty ovations, depending on the topics he broached.

Yoffie was applauded, for example, when he declared that many American Jewish groups “have their heads in the sand” regarding the negative impact of settlements on the well-being of Israel.

The reaction was vastly different, however, when he pointedly criticized the Goldstone report.

“Richard Goldstone should be ashamed of himself — ashamed of himself — for working under the auspices of the U.N. Human Rights Council,” Yoffie said, drawing a smattering of catcalls.

A spokesperson for AIPAC declined to comment on the conference, as did a spokesperson for the Israel embassy. (Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren declined an invitation.)

National Security Adviser Gen. James Jones provided a tacit endorsement of J Street’s efforts Oct. 27 when he told conference participants that President Barack Obama’s administration believes “without equivocation” that “Israeli security and peace are inseparable.”

Shortly before the conference, a dozen members of Congress withdrew from the event’s host committee after being pressured by critics who maintained that the organization is out of step with the Jewish mainstream.

One of those politicians who remained, however, was Rep. Bob Filner (D–San Diego), who received a big round of applause from attendees after revealing that he voted against

a 1994 resolution that condemned a Nation of Islam leader for making anti-Semitic remarks.

Filner said he opposed the measure targeting Khalid Abdul Muhammad, at the time a top lieutenant of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, because it would have violated the First Amendment guarantee of free speech. He said he was the only Jewish member of Congress to oppose the measure.

After the vote, Filner complained, he began to get calls from unnamed members of the Jewish community who told him they weren't going to donate to his campaigns anymore — and he said he eventually lost \$250,000 in contributions per election cycle as a result of his position on Muhammad.

“That kind of money is an intimidating factor,” he said. “I raised a lot less money in succeeding years, but my conscience was cleared,” he said to a rousing ovation.

One of the panelists, Michelle Goldberg, author of “Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism” said the current environment creates “a petri dish” for anti-Israel “conspiracy theories” on both the left and the right.

A self-described liberal and a Zionist, she warned that calls for a one-state solution will grow louder if liberals find it impossible to also be Zionists because they find the Jewish state's policies regarding Arabs unacceptable.

J Street's approach may offer “the last hope” of avoiding that eventuality, she said.

David Kretzmer, a professor emeritus of international law at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, said that the American Jewish community must make it clear that it does not endorse actions of the Israeli government “that damage human rights of Arabs.”