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J Street

and the Debate on Middle East Peace

J Street is a liberal nonprofit advocacy group based in the United States whose stated aim is to promote American leadership to end the Arab-Israeli and Palestinian-Israel conflicts peacefully and diplomatically. It was founded in April 2008. J Street states that it "supports a new direction for American policy in the Middle East - diplomatic solutions over military ones", "multilateral over unilateral approaches to conflict resolution"; and "dialogue over confrontation" with wider international support.

As stated on their website, the organization seeks to provide a political home for pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans who believe that a "two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is essential to Israel's survival as the national home of the Jewish people and as a vibrant democracy." J Street has a two-fold mission: first, to advocate for urgent American diplomatic leadership to achieve a two-state solution and a broader regional, comprehensive peace and, second, to ensure a broad debate on Israel and the Middle East in national politics and the American Jewish community. J Street supports Israel and its desire for security as the Jewish homeland, as well as the right of the Palestinians to a sovereign state of their own. According to its executive director, Jeremy Ben-Ami, J Street is neither pro- nor anti- any individual organization or other pro-Israel umbrella groups like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). He says J Street is proud of AIPAC's many accomplishments and clarified that the two groups have different priorities rather than different views.

J Street is active in political fund raising and Capitol Hill lobbying. The J Street PAC acts as a traditional political action committee raising funds to support a limited number of candidates for Senate and Congressional races. On the Hill, J Street lobbies for and against Israeli-related bills and legislation. According to the J Street website, its political action committee is "the first and only federal Political Action Committee whose goal is to demonstrate that there is meaningful political and financial

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support to candidates for federal office from large numbers of Americans who believe a new direction in American policy will advance U.S. interests in the Middle East and promote real peace and security for Israel and the region."

Alan Solomont, one of the founders of J Street and a former national finance chair of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and currently a Democratic Party fundraiser, described the need for J Street in the following way: "We have heard the voices of neocons, and right-of-center Jewish leaders and Christian evangelicals, and the mainstream views of the American Jewish community have not been heard."¹

During its first conference, Ben-Ami said that "the party and the viewpoint that we're closest to in Israeli politics is actually Kadima." Kadima MK Meir Sheerit, who attended the conference, said, "They are more left than Kadima, but on this main issue, which is peace, I think we agree."

J Street's official policy positions

On Iran: J Street believes Iran cannot be allowed to achieve nuclear weapons and supports a "comprehensive and multilateral approach, rooted in active diplomatic engagement with Iran and the international community. It supports the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act of 2009. J Street is strongly opposed to any consideration at this time of the use of military force by Israel or the United States to attack Iran.

On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: "J Street believes that reaching a sustainable two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is both a fundamental American interest and essential to the survival and security of Israel as a democracy and home for the Jewish people."

On Jerusalem: "Jerusalem's ultimate status and borders should be negotiated and resolved as part of an agreement between official Israeli and Palestinian authorities and endorsed by both peoples." "J Street would support [...] a two-state solution under which the Jewish neighborhoods of Jerusalem would fall under Israeli sovereignty and the Arab neighborhoods would be under Palestinian sovereignty." "J Street does believe that Israel's capital is in Jerusalem and will be internationally recognized as such in the context of an agreed two-state solution."

¹ Abramowitz, Michael (April 15, 2008). "Jewish Liberals to Launch A Counterpoint to AIPAC". The Washington Post. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/14/AR2008041402647.html>.

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On Israeli Settlements: "Israel's settlements in the occupied territories have, for over forty years, been an obstacle to peace. They have drained Israel's economy, military, and democracy and eroded the country's ability to uphold the rule of law."

On Syria: "J Street believes that an Israeli–Syrian peace treaty would contribute significantly to stability and security in the region. The US should vigorously encourage and facilitate Israeli–Syrian peace talks, building on talks pursued previously under Israeli Prime Ministers Rabin, Netanyahu, Barak, and Olmert."

On the Arab World: "J Street believes that the US should actively promote and facilitate reconciliation between Israel and the Arab world, as well as the establishment of diplomatic relations and relevant security guarantees – in the context of a comprehensive peace agreement." J Street references the Arab Peace Initiative proposed by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia as a possible framework for a comprehensive Arab–Israel peace.

Mixed Reactions to J Street

Israeli–American writer and analyst Gershom Gorenberg wrote in the American Prospect that J Street "might change not only the political map in Washington but the actual map in the Middle East."²

Noah Pollak at Commentary Magazine predicted that the effort would fall flat and show there are no "great battalions of American Jewish doves languishing in voicelessness."³

Ken Wald, a political scientist at University of Florida, predicted the group would be attacked by the "Jewish right." According to BBC News, Wald warned that J Street "will get hammered and accused of being anti–Israel. A lot will have to do with the way they actually frame their arguments."⁴

James Kirchick, writing in the The New Republic, called J Street's labeling of AIPAC as "right wing" "ridiculous"; Kirchick says that AIPAC's former president told him that AIPAC was the first American Jewish organization to support Oslo and supports a two–state solution. Kirchick further asserts that some of J Street's positions, such as advocating negotiations with Hamas, are not popular with most American Jews. According to a March

² Gorenberg, Gershom (April 15, 2008). "J Street on the Map". American Prospect. http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=j_street_on_the_map.

³ Pollak, Noah (April 15, 2008). "Taking It to the (J) Street". Commentary Magazine. <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/blogs/index.php/pollak/3364>.

⁴ Besser, James (March 26, 2008). "New PAC To Offer Poles A Dovish Mideast View". The Jewish Week. http://www.thejewishweek.com/viewArticle/c39_a5882/News/International.html.

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2008 Haaretz–Dialog poll the majority of Israelis do support direct talks with Hamas, although this referred solely to the issue of kidnapped Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.⁵

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, called J Street's reaction to the Israeli invasion of Gaza "morally deficient, profoundly out of touch with Jewish sentiment and also appallingly naïve." J Street responded stating, "It is hard for us to understand how the leading reform rabbi in North America could call our effort to articulate a nuanced view on these difficult issues "morally deficient." If our views are "naïve" and "morally deficient", then so are the views of scores of Israeli journalists, security analysts, distinguished authors, and retired IDF officers who have posed the same questions about the Gaza attack as we have."⁶

In April 2009, the Washington Post called J Street "Washington's leading pro–Israel PAC," citing the group's impressive fund raising efforts in its first year and its record of electoral success, including 33 victories by J Street–supported candidates for Congress.⁷

According to Caroline Glick, deputy managing editor of the Jerusalem Post, J Street is anything but pro–Israel: "Through their actions, J Street and its allies have made clear that their institutional interests are served by weakening Israel. Their mission is to harm Israel's standing in Washington and weaken the influence of the mainstream American Jewish community that supports Israel."⁸

In August 2009, J Street released its fundraising figures for its PAC division. It showed that "at most 3 percent of the organization's thousands of contributors" were Arab and Muslim donors. Lenny Ben–David, a former Israeli diplomat and current lobbyist for AIPAC, criticized J Street for accepting such donations: "It raises questions as to their banner that they're a pro–Israel organization. Why would people who are not known to be pro–Israel give money to this organization?" J Street President Ben–Ami said that such supporters show the broad appeal of J Street's message and its commitment to coexistence: "I think it

⁵ Yossi Verter, "Poll: Most Israelis back direct talks with Hamas on Shalit", Haaretz, February 27, 2008

⁶ <http://www.forward.com/articles/14847/>

⁷ Eggen, Dan (April 17, 2009). "Year–Old Liberal Jewish Lobby Has Quickly Made Its Mark". The Washington Post. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/16/AR2009041603995.html>.

⁸ Carline Glick: The Lonely Israeli Left Jerusalem Post, July 30, 2009

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is a terrific thing for Israel for us to be able to expand the tent of people who are willing to be considered pro-Israel and willing to support Israel through J Street. One of the ways that we're trying to redefine what it means to be pro-Israel is that you actually don't need to be anti-Arab or anti-Palestinian to be pro-Israel."

In July 2010, J Street supported the construction of the Cordoba House cultural center and mosque near the World Trade Center site in New York. President Jeremy Ben-Ami released a statement saying:

"The principle at stake ... goes to the heart of American democracy, and the value we place on freedom of religion. Should one religious group in this country be treated differently than another? We believe the answer is no.... proposing a church or a synagogue for that site would raise no questions. The Muslim community has an equal right to build a community center wherever it is legal to do so."

In September 2010, John Tabin from the American Spectator, wrote: "As the Washington Times's Eli Lake reported on Friday, one of them is J Street, the fake "pro-Israel" organization that exists to make the US government less pro-Israel. What makes J Street different is the lengths they've gone to conceal and even lie about their connection to Soros. Over at NewsBusters, Alana Goodman has a good rundown of journalists who've been deceived by J Street on this front. Soros has written that he's "not a Zionist," and in 2003 he blamed Israel for European anti-Semitism (echoing the "look at how she was dressed, she was asking for it" school of victim-blaming). So it's no surprise that J Street would try to obfuscate about their connection to Soros. But this is just a symptom of the deception that is at the core of J Street's identity, which involves attempting to revive the failed ideas of the Israeli far-left by claiming that, in advocating those ideas, they are accurately reflecting the views of the American Jewish community. One hopes, now that the deception about Soros's money has been exposed, that journalists will be skeptical of claims not only about J Street's funding, but also about its agenda."⁹

In response, J Street stated that: "George Soros did not found J Street. In fact, George Soros very publicly stated his decision not to be engaged in J Street when it was launched – precisely out of fear that his involvement would be used against the organization. J Street's Executive Director has stated many times that he would in fact be very pleased to have funding from Mr.

⁹ <http://spectator.org/blog/2010/09/27/j-streets-deception>

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Soros and the offer remains open to him to be a funder should he wish to support the effort. J Street has thousands of donors, large and small. The supporters of the political action committee (JStreetPAC) can be publicly reviewed on the website of the Federal Election Commission. The top donors to J Street are members of the organization's Finance Committee – listed in its annual report on page 9. Many of its major donors are also members of its Advisory Council.”¹⁰

Also in September 2010, the Washington Times reported that the White House had no comment on reports it was distancing itself from J Street over the group's funding sources.¹¹ Spokesman Thomas Vietor declined to comment when asked if the White House would continue inviting J Street leaders to take part in conference calls with senior White House officials. Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said Monday that The Times story was important because it exposed how Mr. Soros was funding J Street despite previous denials from the group. In a 2007 article in the New York Review of Books, Mr. Soros urged the Democratic Party to free itself from the influence of AIPAC and said that Howard Dean did not win his party's nomination in 2004 because he was not sufficiently pro-Israel.

Copies of J Street's financial documents obtained by the Times indicate the organization received nearly half of its 2008–2009 revenue from a single donor in Hong Kong named Consolacion Esdicul, who contributed \$811,697. J Street's executive director said Esdicul donated the money at the behest of a Pittsburgh-based philanthropist. Hungarian-born billionaire George Soros and his family donated \$750,000.

House Minority Whip Eric Cantor called on the White House Monday, September 27th, to disassociate itself from J Street. Cantor said the organization does not reflect the mainstream position of the pro-Israel community in America.

¹⁰ <http://jstreet.org/page/j-street-myths-and-facts>

¹¹ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/sep/27/jewish-group-falls-from-favor-at-white-house/?page=2>