

Impressions from the J Street Convention

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J Street's first national convention in Washington, DC last week was uplifting and exciting on one hand, but frustrating and disappointing on the other.

UPLIFTING AND EXCITING

The J Street convention was uplifting and exciting because J Street represents a new Jewish voice in Washington that is distinctly more progressive than the established Israel lobby.

Attendance exceeded expectations showing that there really is a large group of Jewish Americans who are dissatisfied with the traditional Jewish political organizations. They feel unrepresented, and are looking to J Street to represent them. J Street leadership's goal was 1,000 attendees. From the way registration was going, I guessed they would miss that goal by a significant margin. In fact, over 1,500 people registered – 50% over the goal. That led to a logistics problem of not enough seating room in plenary and breakout session. Almost every session was standing-room only, even on Tuesday when there were changes to larger rooms. All-in-all J Street handled the unexpectedly large crowd quite well.

Progressive Jewish Americans who support a Palestinian state alongside Israel flocked to J Street as an alternative to the main-line Jewish organizations that form the core of the Israeli lobby. These people are fed-up with groups like AIPAC and ADL that lobby Congress and the Administration in their names, for a right-wing, Likud position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that they don't support.

J Street is on the Washington political map. With better than expected attendance, J Street broke the Israel lobby lock on Jewish access to American politics. The keynote address was given by General James Jones, President Obama's National Security Advisor, who said "...you can be sure that this Administration will be represented at all other future J Street conferences." From Congress, 26 Senators and 124 Representatives signed-on to the J Street host committee, six spoke from the podium, about 45 attended the conventions dinner, and two Senators sent a congratulatory letter that appeared in the program. Quite a good showing by an organization in existence for only 18 months old.

J Street is also on the Israeli, Palestinian, and Arab political maps. Eleven present and former Knesset members, led by Haim Ramon (former Vice-Prime Minister under Ehud Olmert) and Ami Ayalon (former head of Shin Bet), spoke at the conference, and congratulatory letters from Israeli President Shimon Peres and opposition leader Tzipi Livni were read to the opening session and appeared in the dinner program. One former Palestinian minister and the Ambassador of Jordan spoke from the podium, and King Abdullah II of Jordan sent a video greeting that was shown at the dinner.

FRUSTRATING AND DISAPPOINTING

The J Street convention was frustrating and disappointing because J Street is not as progressive as most of the attendees wanted, and is not that distinct a voice to counter the established Israeli lobby.

Conference attendees were clearly to the left of J Street leadership as judged by the choice of presenters and J Street's public statements on the Gaza war, the Goldstone Report, and other issues. The J Street base is left-leaning; not so J Street leadership. This was apparent by which statements from the podium elicited cheers, and which did not. The audience sat silent at calls for sanctions on Iran and that the Goldstone report was biased, and even booed when Goldstone was personally attacked. In contrast, the audience cheered wildly at calls for a Palestinian state alongside Israel, for human rights for all, and for a strong American hand in achieving peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

J Street's political position was not a surprise. J Street was formed as a political amalgamation of Americans for Peace Now, Israel Policy Forum, and Brit Tzedek v'Shalom. As such, J Street has the politics of those groups – namely that: (1) a two-state solution is in Israel's interest, (2) the occupation is a barrier to peace, (3) a Palestinian state must be economically viable, and (4) never seriously criticize Israel. This puts J Street just to the left of the Israel lobby (which itself has a range of positions). J Street's positions are outlined in an Appendix 1, along with a comparison of the response to the Goldstone Report and H.Res. 9867 by AIPAC, J Street, and Tikkun Appendix 2.

Attendees by and large agreed with points 1, 2, and 3, but a large fraction of attendees reject point 4. The difference on willingness to criticize Israel reflects the prime concern of the speakers and the attendees. Many speakers appear driven by their Zionism, and openly expressed their "love of Israel." In contrast, many in the audience appear driven by their Jewish ethic of universal justice, and were offended by the occupation in all its manifestations including settlements expropriating Palestinian land, Palestinian house demolitions, the siege of Gaza, and the killing of nearly 1,000 civilians during the Gaza bombardment. I heard the occupation described as "an Israel boot on the Palestinian neck."

Completely missing from the above discussion, and from the conference itself, were Jewish and semi-Jewish peace groups like Tikkun, Jewish Voice for Peace, Americans Jews for a Just Peace, and U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation.

The difference between J Street leadership and conference attendees is illustrated by different reactions to a resolution just introduced into the House of Representatives – H.Res.-867 – that aims to kill and bury the Goldstone report. The official J Street statement (<http://www.jstreet.org/blog/?p=697>) does not oppose the resolution, although it calls for it to be modified. Many attendees would find the resolution offensive and want it killed. The resolution was not a talking point on the last day of the conference when half the attendees went to Capitol Hill to lobby their Congressmen.

There was a general acceptance at the conference that the Israel-Palestine peace process is in grid-lock, and that any forward progress relies on an active United States role. Many speakers called on the Obama Administration to formally propose a detailed peace plan. The idea is that neither party "can say no" to an American sponsored. plan. A distinction is made between an

American peace plan (which cannot be denied), and the American push for a settlement freeze (that was rejected by Israel).

The only attempt to tie U.S. policy in Israel-Palestine into the broader U.S. goals in the Middle East focused on Iran. The assertion was made, and generally accepted, that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will make it easier to contain Iran. There was no talk of containing terrorism or assuring the free flow of oil.

PROSPECTS

J Street is here to stay. But I am not optimistic it will enable a significant breakthrough towards a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The fact is that Israeli leadership across the Israeli political spectrum, is not ready for a Palestinian state that is economically viable and politically sovereign. In spite of Israeli public opinion favoring two-state solution, Israeli leadership still seems to be working for a greater Israel that includes much of the West Bank. Until that attitude changes, there is no chance of real progress towards a two-state solution.

Many activists believe that the only route to change runs through Washington – that the United States must make its diplomatic, financial, and military support for Israel conditional on Israel making significant progress towards peace, or directly pressure Israel into making concessions for peace. But the J Street position does not support either pressure on Israel, nor reduction in the broad, unconditional United Support for Israel. And without such action, prospects for a change in the Israeli political climate are nil, and the prospects for a breakthrough in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations nonexistent.

United States foreign policy establishment was hardly mentioned during the J Street conference, but they are a major player in developing American policy towards the Israel and Palestine. The foreign policy establishment is concerned with the “strategic interests of the United States,” namely containing terrorism, spreading democracy, and assuring the free flow of oil. To that end they advocate for a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The idea is that as long as the conflict is unresolved, United States ability to pursue its larger goals in the Middle East is constrained. This idea was enunciated by the Iraq Study Group, Brent Scowcroft, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Mearsheimer and Walt, and others, and President Obama has said as much several times.

Today the tension between the foreign policy establishment and the Israel lobby, with no significant deviation by J Street, tilts toward the side of the Israeli lobby’s effort to preserve the status quo. But eventually the “price” of unconditional support for Israel will become too great, and there will be a change in American policy. We will see the United States finally become a truly “honest broker,” and the dynamics of Middle East peace will finally change. I hope that does not come too late for a two-state solution.

Appendix 1: Notes on J Street's Principles and Core Beliefs

By Jeff Warner (LA Jews for Peace, PatnJeff@Keyway.net)

J Street's Principles (From www.JStreet.org), include support for the following goals:

1. A consistent and concerted diplomatic engagement by the United States government to achieve Israeli-Arab peace.
2. An enduring relationship between the US and Israel that promotes their common interests.
3. The creation of a viable Palestinian state as part of a negotiated two-state solution, based on the 1967 borders with agreed reciprocal land swaps.
4. An Israeli-Syrian peace agreement based on the land-for-peace formula.
5. A comprehensive regional peace that builds on the Arab Initiative, leading to recognition of Israel by all its neighbors in the Middle East and the creation of a new regional approach to cooperation and security.
6. An American foreign policy in the Middle East broadly based on diplomacy, multilateralism, and real partnership with the European Union, the Quartet, and others.

Additional J Street Core Beliefs (extracted from J Street verbal and written statements):

7. Love of the state of Israel, and an unwillingness to criticize it.
8. The status quo puts the Jewish, democratic homeland of Israel at risk.
9. Israel's occupation as of Palestine is a root cause of unrest and lack of progress towards peace.
10. Don't publically criticize the U.S. government, and don't discuss the broader implications of U.S. Middle East foreign policy except for Iran.
11. Does not support consequences if Israel does not seriously negotiate and make real progress towards peace.

Some Specific J Street Positions:

- Settlements: Calls Israeli settlements an obstacle to peace; supports President Obama's original call for an immediate and total freeze of settlement construction.
- The Wall: Supports the "separation barrier," but wants it placed on the Green Line.
- Iran: "The United States and Israel have a clear interest in preventing Iran from possessing nuclear weapons." Supports President Obama's efforts at diplomacy. Believes sanctions will be counterproductive.
- Arab World: Supports peace with Syria and Arab peace initiative.

Appendix 2: Comparative Notes on J Street's Response to the Goldstone Report

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AIPAC (Core of the Israel Lobby): Completely Reject Goldstone Report

- Cheers that the Obama Administration and Congress forcefully rejected the Goldstone report . . . calling it “‘deeply flawed’ and ‘irredeemably biased.’”
- Argues the Goldstone report failed to recognize Israel's right to self-defense after years of rocket attacks against its civilians. “It is vital for Congress and the administration to continue to stand by Israel as it works to combat this report and the denial of its right to self-defense.” The Goldstone report raises serious questions about the rights of nations to defend themselves from terror attacks like those launched by Hamas against Israel.
- Asserts the Goldstone report is part of a pattern at the U.N. of singling out Israel for criticism and condemnation.
- Claims Israel's actions in Gaza were consistent with international law and subject to rigorous internal legal scrutiny, and therefore there is no need for an investigation.

J Street: Partial Acceptance and Rejection of Goldstone U.N. Report.

- Chides Israel for not cooperating with Goldstone commission.
- Accepts recommendation for Israel and Hamas to conduct internal, independent investigations.
- Condemns Hamas (but not Israel) for war crimes.
- Tacitly rejects other Goldstone recommendations, including for the UN to monitor investigations, if investigations are substandard to refer report to ICC, to open Gaza crossings and ease fishing restrictions, allow freedom of movement for Palestinians, release prisoners, allow peaceful protests in Israel, and pay reparations.
- Support Obama Administration actions in UN to undermine Goldstone report.
- Support H.Res.867; calls for modifying incorrect “whereas” statements, accepts “resolve” statements including last one that calls for U.S. to announce that it will veto any UN Security Council recommendation for referral to ICC. [Before any credible investigation].
- Allows personal attacks on Goldstone at Convention to go unchallenged.
- Condemns U.N. Human Rights Council for series of “one-sided resolutions” (compare AIPAC statements).

Tikkun: No Direct Statement, but Published Interview with Justice Richard Goldstone.

- Tikkun consistently stands for human rights, even pointing out Israel's transgressions. Says Israel is the new God of the Jews, and therefore not subject to criticism.
- No one is helping the Jewish people by condoning Israeli human rights violations--they are simply being enablers of the self-destructive behavior of Israel. While we do not condone acts of violence by the Palestinian group Hamas against Israeli citizens, and do not accept their lobbing bombs at Israeli cities as a "legitimate act of self-defense" any more than we accept Israeli bombing of Palestinian towns as a legitimate act of self-defense, we do not believe that one group's violations of human rights can provide a justification for another group's violations of human rights! . . . we feel perfectly justified in calling for a change in Israeli behavior.