

Analysis of Jeremy Ben-Ami's *A New Voice for Israel*

By Richard Platkin

In his new book, *A New Voice for Israel – Fighting for the Survival of the Jewish Nation* (Palgrave-MacMillan 2011), Jeremy Ben-Ami, the founder and president of J Street, presents a personal and organizational testament. This book serves at least two purposes. First, it is a detailed portrait of Ben Ami's background, including his family's involvement in Zionist politics from the 19th century to the present. In this section he describes his family's political evolution in Ottoman Palestine, the British Mandate, and the State of Israel, from Socialist-Zionism, to Zionist-Revisionism (i.e., political conservatives), to his break with his family to become a liberal Zionist advocating rapprochement with Palestinians culminating in a carefully negotiated two state solution. Second, the book presents a detailed description of J Street, the Washington, DC lobbying organization he founded in 2008 and now leads.

J-Street's Mission: Ben Ami describes J Street as pro-Israel and pro-peace. He presents its mission as having at least three objectives:

- 1. Educating and organizing within the Jewish community in the United States for support of a two state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict.**

Within the American Jewish community J Street is particularly concerned about Jewish youth. In this regards Mr. Ben-Ami cites recent research documenting that Jewish youth care much less about Israel than their parents and grand-parents, in part because of Israel's long-term direct (West Bank) and indirect (Gaza) occupations of the territories it conquered in 1967.

- 2. Presenting a counter lobbying efforts to AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a large, seasoned, highly influential, and well-funded lobbying presence in the United States closely aligned and strongly supportive of the settler movement and the current Israeli government.**

As a result, through their actions and advocacy, in practice AIPAC favors permanent Israeli control of the Golan Heights, West Bank, and East Jerusalem through the on-going construction of Jewish-only cities, towns, outposts, and by-pass highways, as well as checkpoints, separation/apartheid walls, and military installations.

3. **Supporting political forces in Israel that favor a two state solution as outlined at Camp David and in the Oslo Accords, roughly modeled after United Nations Resolution 242 and 333, known as Land for Peace.**

These formulations call for a two state solution roughly modeled after the 1949- 1967 armistice lines (i.e, the Green Line) but with land swaps. The proposed Palestinian state would be demilitarized and absorb nearly all of the refugees and their descendents who wished to return.

Plight of U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East: What Ben-Ami spends little time discussing in his book are internal conditions in Israel or the occupied Palestinian territories, as well as the broad and rapidly deepening crisis facing U.S. foreign policy in the greater Middle East.

Regarding internal conditions in Israel, it is surprising that a policy analyst and advocate whose personal biography presents his deep involvement with human rights and social issues in the American liberal tradition spends so little time addressing comparable issues within Israel and the emerging Palestinian state. While Ben-Ami does devote several pages (181-183) to issues of minority rights for non-Jews, civil liberties, Orthodox-secular conflicts, and poverty within Israel, his program to address these pressing issues is subsumed under the two state solution. In Ben-Ami's words, "The tensions inherent in being both a Jewish homeland and democratic state for all its citizens are enormous. Achieving an appropriate balance will probably be the foremost internal challenge to Israel's strength and vibrancy in the coming hundred years. ***It is likely to remain unresolved until the larger fight with the Palestinian people is done.***" (p. 183, emphasis mine.)

As for the parallel issues facing the Palestinians, whose social, political, and economic lives will be intertwined with Israel's under any political arrangement, including a two state solution, Ben Ami has little to say. While he makes a spirited case that the occupation is not only immoral and illegal, but also counter-productive to long-term Israeli and U.S. interests, this is not a book where you will find discussion or references to the problems of poverty, inequality, internal political repression, religious fervor, water, sanitation, and education besetting the Palestinian Authority and the Gaza Strip. Let us hope that a lack of space, rather than a lack on interest, is responsible for this omission from Ben-Ami's book. If or when the two state solution he advocates does appear, its viability will turn on these issues. This is why it makes sense to address these concerns now, not later. To defer or ignore these questions, or to assume that Palestinian independence will magically heal these social, economic, and political problems, is clearly shortsighted.

Regarding the broader foreign policy issues in the Middle East, Ben Ami to his credit, devotes his Chapter 12, "America's Stake in Ending the Conflict" to some of these issues. Even before the unpredicted emergence of the Arab Spring in March 2011, he acknowledges that the situation for the United States in the Middle East was problematic. Now, each day presents new headlines about the U.S. government's setbacks in the region. At present the U.S. is either stalemated or losing wars in Afghanistan-Pakistan, Iraq, and Libya. Other areas it has a military presence or strategic interests in, such as Yemen, Somalia, and Bahrain, are in deep turmoil, with defeats of regional allies temporarily postponed, but hardly prevented.

Likewise, Ben-Ami glosses over the role that the U.S. government's de facto financial, diplomatic, and military support for Israeli occupation plays in accelerating the decline of U.S. hegemony in the highly important, highly contested, energy-rich Middle East. Nevertheless, Ben-Ami's associate, Daniel Levy, made exactly these arguments in the May 18, 2011, *New York Times*, in an opinion piece entitled, "Room for Debate: Obama's Arab-Israeli Options -- from Illusions to Solutions." In this article Levy clearly outlined how the failures of the U.S. government to actively promote a two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict undercut the strategic position of the United States in the greater Middle East.

Levy, for example cites the remarks of General David Patreus. Until he was silenced, General Patreus stated that Israel's actions endangered U.S. soldiers in the Middle East. And before these comments, two of the elder guardians of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, Republican Brent Scowcroft and Democrat Zbigniew Brzezinski, co-authored an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* (November 21, 2008) in which they argued, "Resolution of the Palestinian issues would have a positive impact on the region. It would liberate Arab governments to support the U.S. leadership in dealing with regional problems, as they did before the Iraq invasion ... In many ways the current situation is such that the opportunity for success has never been greater, or the costs of failure more severe."

Scowcroft and Brzezinski represent the realist, multilateral branch of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, and it was their colleagues, Prof. Stephen Wald of Harvard and Prof. John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago, whose widely circulated 2007 study, *The Israel Lobby*, made a similar, but more detailed and forceful case. They argued that U.S. national interests -- by which they mean continued U.S. political and military dominance in the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea regions -- would be best served by a U.S. foreign policy which treated Israel like other countries in the region, not a special case. They also argued that U.S. foreign policy toward Israel was driven by domestic politics, which undercut U.S. "national interests" in the region. They even went so far as to state the obvious, that Israel's program of occupation and settlements negates its role as a formidable pro-U.S. military power in the Middle East. They pointed out that the

U.S. has successfully cultivated Israel as an extraordinary powerful military ally, but Israel's settlement policies have completely negated its potential to militarily support the United States in its current and future military adventures. They even argued (*Israel Lobby*, p. 234) that a two-state solution would allow the U.S. government to eventually integrate the Israeli military into its own military operations throughout the greater Middle East.

Furthermore, since the *Israel Lobby* and the *Washington Post* ed-op piece were published, four critical U.S. allies in this region have begun peeling themselves away from the United States: Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Palestinian Authority. Since some of these changes pivot on the Arab-Israeli conflict, the real meaning of J Street's motto of being pro-Israel and pro-Peace, is that its advocacy of a two state solution could fortify the Pax Americana, which is now faltering.

- Turkey, now ruled by a moderate Islamic Party, no longer aligns itself with U.S. policies and interests in the region, and has a highly problematic relationship with its former ally Israel after Israeli commandos murdered 9 Turkish civilians on the Mavi Marmara in 2010. They were part of an aid flotilla to Gaza and were murdered in international waters. Furthermore, the high-ranking Turkish military officers who formed the personal and institutional connections between Turkey, Israel, and the United States have just been drummed out of the Turkish military through face-saving "early retirements."
- In Egypt the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak has unleashed new political forces whose dynamic cannot be easily predicted. Will the regime survive through the military which maintained Mubarak in power? Will U.S. efforts to utilize NGO's promoting pro-U.S. political parties allow a new civilian Egyptian government sympathetic to the United States? Will Islamic parties, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood, dominate the upcoming Egyptian elections? Will the modern secularists largely responsible for ousting Mubarak maintain their political momentum, with unknown political outcomes? Meanwhile, the post-Mubarak military regime now controlling Egypt has already renewed diplomatic relations with Iran and allowed some transfer of people and goods to and from the Gaza Strip. While the siege still holds, it has become more porous than it was under Hosni Mubarak, who worked hand-in-glove with Israel and the United States to isolate the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip.
- Saudi Arabia has also distanced itself from the United States as a result of the Arab spring and the rise of China. Like its competitor, Iran, China is now Saudi Arabia's largest oil customer, and Saudi Arabia has also begun purchasing arms from Russia. Its former Ambassador to the United States, Turki al-Faisal, also wrote in the *Washington Post* ("Failed Favoritism Toward Israel," June 11, 2011) that the time has come for the United States government to take the interests of the Palestinians seriously and no longer assume that Arab governments aligned with the United States, like his, can be taken for granted

or that the Arab street will remain passive when its concern for the Palestinians are ignored. In case anyone doubted his position, he wrote, “In September, the kingdom will use its considerable diplomatic might to support the Palestinians in their quest for international recognition. American leaders have long called Israel in “indispensable” ally. They will soon learn that there are other players in the region – not least the Arab street – who are equally, if not more, indispensable. . . There will be disastrous consequences of the U.S.-Saudi relations if the United States vetoes U.N. recognition of a Palestinian state.”

- Finally, a wholly owned subsidiary of the United States and Israel, the Palestinian Authority, has made serious efforts to patch up its split with Hamas and also present its case for an independent nation state to the United Nations in September 2011. Even with threats that the United States government would withhold its aid, totaling about \$760 million per year, the Palestinian Authority has not yet been stopped from such a powerful but strictly symbolic action.

Ben-Ami’s Balancing Act: Against this unstated but ominous backdrop, Ben-Ami has an enormous task in front of him. On one hand, he wants to maintain Israel as an ethnocratic Jewish state and ensure that Israel remains a strong regional military ally of its foreign patron, the United States, in the Middle East. On the other hand, he repeatedly emphasizes his support of what he describes as the democratic character of the United States and Israel. He also bases his position on social justice, human rights, and humanitarian values, while leaving Israel’s neo-liberal economic policies and discriminatory laws regarding non-Jews largely intact, deferring resolution of Israel’s and the Palestinian Authority’s high level of economic inequality until a political solution is achieved.

Although the current wave of consumer actions in Israel, including tent cities, strikes, and demonstrations by the Israeli public over low wages and the high price of housing and groceries, appeared after Ben-Ami’s book was published, all of the economic issues were present prior to these street actions. In fact, Ben Ami points out that Israel’s 39.2 Gini coefficient of internal inequality ranks it at about 75th out of 149 ranked countries (<http://www.visionofhumanity.org/gpi-data/#/2010/GINI>). This means that Israel has greater internal inequality than all other industrialized countries except the United States and China. By other related measures, Egypt, Libya, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, and Saudi Arabia all rank higher than Israel! As a result his book has a “structured absence” by giving short shrift to Israel’s deplorable statistics regarding wealth and income inequality.

Furthermore, while walking this tight rope, Ben-Ami also wants to rebut AIPAC and Christian Zionists to his right, along with many of Israel’s critics to his left, including some who are Israelis. Likewise, within the Washington, D.C. beltway, J Street’s lobbying efforts must be framed by what is good for U.S. corporate and

governmental interests in the Middle East, while in the Jewish community, he must base his case on “What is good for the Jews” and “What is best for Israel.” Luckily, 9-11 allowed this gap to be papered over with rhetoric about the War on Terrorism, but after 10 years, these widely repeated arguments have little traction and nothing has emerged to take its place, except the Iran bashing supported by J Street.

As a liberal, pro-Israel, American Jewish Zionist of Israeli background, Ben-Ami’s job is not getting any easier. One day he has to fend off extreme Israeli nationalists, like the settlers and their U.S. supporters, in particular those in Stand With Us. They regularly call him and those connected to J Street and similar Jewish organizations, self-hating Jewish traitors for advocating a two state solution. They even try to deny Ben-Ami speaking locations, disrupt J Street meetings, and phone in occasional bomb threats. But, then, the next day Ben-Ami has to defend Israel from proposals which will undercut its role as a military ally of the United States in the Middle East. These include calls from other activists, often Jewish, that U.S. military aid to Israel should be frozen until there is a successful peace process. Likewise, he has to side-step proposals that the U.S. government should quit using its veto power at the United Nations Security Council to stop resolutions opposing Israeli settlements or supporting the Goldstone Report documenting Israeli war crimes in its attack on the Gaza Strip in December 2009 and January 2010. Similarly Ben-Ami must continually find a way to make nice with many other Jewish critics of Israel, while withholding J Street support for their calls to support the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement; join public protests against the Israeli government, or criticize the shallowness of Israeli democracy within the 1949-1967 Green Line.

Contradictions inherent to Liberalism: In the final analysis, Ben-Ami reflects the deep contradictions facing the remnants of liberalism in the United States. Even during its hey day, stretching from FDR’s New Deal in the 1930’s to Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society in the 1960’s, liberals did not have it easy. They presented themselves as progressives, while supporting virulent anti-communism, including witch hunts, black lists, and incarceration of the leadership of the Communist Party USA. They, likewise, presented themselves as racially and ethnically tolerant, even when liberal politicians refused most European Jews refuge in the United States until 1944. And, these same liberal icons also threw Japanese-American into concentration camps, fought the Third Reich with a racially segregated army, and later used the FBI to closely monitor and infiltrate the civil rights movement. Even later, these contradictions continued to mount. Two highly regarded liberals, in particular Presidents Jack Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, planned and prosecuted the Vietnam War, turning the anti-communist Cold War into hot wars which killed an estimated three million people in Indo-China, including 55,000 American soldiers.

Meanwhile, the children of these liberal hawks became doves, including Ben-Ami and his peers. They were out on the streets protesting these liberal wars and many other social issues, such as civil rights. To make matters worse, only in recent years have we learned the full extent of the civil liberties violations initiated by the Johnson Administration through the FBI's Cointelpro and the CIA's Operation Chaos against the anti-Vietnam War movement.

The inherent contradictions of liberal viewpoints, like Ben-Ami's, are certain to increase throughout the 21st century. This is because the U.S. government is initiating long-term, draconian, and **fully bi-partisan** cutbacks in the domestic safety net, while continuing its post-Cold War military escalation throughout the greater Middle East and on China's periphery. Those political actors, like Ben-Ami, who believe that this political circle can be squared, will have tough sledding indeed.

Out of this mess, however, Ben-Ami's and J Street may just muddle through with their mission to downsize Israel to its 1967 boundaries, while postponing the resolution of internal political, economic, and social issues. When the U.S. government either shifts its foreign policy because of mounting and irreversible setbacks in the Middle East or simply retreats from many of its wars and foreign bases out of economic and military exhaustion, the U.S. financial, diplomatic, and military support that Israel requires for its occupations will evaporate. At that point Israel will face stark choices. It just might resort to a two state solution in order to survive, and the Ben-Ami's of Israel and the Jewish diaspora will finally be in a favorable position. Whether they – or their Palestinian counterparts – will then turn to domestic issues is an open question.

If, however, the occupation of the Golan Heights, West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem has advanced to the point that partition is no longer possible and massive ethnic cleansing is not politically possible, a single or confederated state could emerge. If or when this South Africa-type solution presents itself, Ben-Ami's efforts to maintain a balancing between his exclusive Jewish nationalism and professed devotion to democracy and humanistic values would be tested to the maximum. Given his fervent devotion to Israel as a Jewish state, it would be quite surprising if he would eventually support a one state solution which subsumed both Israeli and Palestinian nationalism as an antithesis to the apartheid he unhesitatingly admits is now unfolding.

At this historical juncture Ben-Ami's political future would then be closely tied to the right-wing Israeli nationalists he now sees as his primary nemesis. In this scenario, his underlying but unstated agreement with his ideological opponents in the Jewish community would become clear and open. Zionists of all stripes, from the most ardent settlers, like those who now call Ben-Ami a self-hating Jewish traitor, to the most liberal, such as Meretz, who support Ben-Ami, would find common cause in rejecting a democratic end to an ethnocratic Jewish state. Those, like Ben-Ami, who equate the survival of Israel with "The Survival of the

Jewish Nation”, could no longer maintain their delicate balancing act. Their commitment to nationalism would undoubtedly prevail over their commitment to democracy. While Ben-Ami can temporarily avoid this wrenching dilemma, time is not on his side in keeping the ultimate implications of his position cloaked.

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