

Did
Someone
Just Say

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As if it wasn't hard enough for American presidents to encourage Israeli politicians to get constructive when it comes to Middle East peace, they also have to contend with hawkish lobby groups at home. But there are signs that change is afoot in Washington...

BY DANIEL ALLEN

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ONE OF THE MOST DEEPLY DIVISIVE ISSUES TO HAVE GAINED EXPOSURE DURING OBAMA'S PRESIDENTIAL TENURE is the power of Washington's lobby groups. Now, with peace negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians locked in an impasse over

settlement building – and with mid-term elections also coming up this month – the debate on the extent to which these groups help or hinder America's foreign policy in the Middle East has become increasingly vocal.

The major institutions of the traditional pro-Israel lobby were founded during the 1980s, working to reinforce a U.S.-Israeli strategic alliance forged in the aftermath of the 1967 war. By far the most important of these is the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Boasting a membership of more than one hundred thousand and underpinned by a \$150 million endowment, AIPAC has an annual budget of around \$50 million.

Lighting a fire under the whole Middle East lobbying issue, an essay in 2006 by Harvard's Stephen Walt and the University of Chicago's John Mearsheimer argued that a powerful pro-Israel lobby has actively served to steer U.S. policy, often against American national interest. Unsurprisingly, Walt and Mearsheimer's work continues to attract support and criticism in equally heated measure.

Hussein Ibish, Senior Fellow at Washington DC-based lobby group The American Task Force on Palestine, takes a more nuanced view. "The problem is not that pro-Israel forces have been successful in mobilising the normal levers of power in the United States – money, voting and advocacy of various kinds – as this is legitimate," he says. "The American system is designed from its outset, to be lobbied. It's hard to be annoyed by an interest group that is successful in using the levers of power that are available to everybody else as well. The biggest problem, in my view, is that pro-Palestinian forces, especially Arab-Americans, have totally failed to create any kind of countervailing influence."

IT'S CERTAINLY NOT HARD TO ARGUE THAT ARAB-AMERICANS HAVE A PR PROBLEM when it comes to influencing Washington's Israel-Palestine policy. However they do have a new ally on their side. And the surprise is that it comes in the shape of a pro-Israel lobby group. Founded in mid-2008, J Street has presented itself as a necessary counterweight to the power of right-wing pro-Israel lobbies. These, it claims, have undermined Israel's and America's interests by pursuing a hawkish policy, instead of truly promoting a two-state solution.

"J Street was founded because, for too long, the loudest voices on Israel in the American-Jewish community came from the Right of the political spectrum," explains J Street's Amy Spitalnick. "Polling has consistently shown that the moderate majority of mainstream American Jews support a pro-Israel, pro-peace foreign policy that is consistent with our Jewish and progressive values. We've created a political home for these many American Jews and other friends of Israel to broaden the debate on this issue, and to advocate for strong American leadership in pursuit of two states."

The J in J Street doesn't just stand for Jewish. It's a take on one of the three letters which are not used in the naming of Washington's streets. The symbolism is clear: a missing street and a missing voice in the halls of power – a voice which has grown ever louder since the liberal group's foundation.

J Street currently has about 150,000 supporters, and JStreetPAC, the group's political action committee, expects to distribute close to \$1 million during this month's mid-term elections. Senior J Street members, who cemented close ties to senior figures in Obama's presidential campaign, are now regularly consulted by the administration.

The emergence of a credible and moderate alternative to AIPAC has so far produced encouraging results. J Street's establishment was widely hailed by Washington's pro-Arab lobby, including James Zogby, founder and president of the Arab American Institute, a non-profit advocacy group based in Washington DC.

"J Street represents a majority view in the American-Jewish community," he says. "AIPAC represents a minority view, but it has been able to present itself as if it were the controlling factor behind Jewish-American voters. With the emergence of J Street, internal debate within the Jewish community has taken form. It is an extraordinarily positive development"

James Zogby has been struck by the new spirit of co-operation that J Street's foundation has engendered. "Late last year, when I attended J Street's Gala Banquet, I was surprised by the number of Arabs and Arab Americans who were in attendance, and the gracious reception they were given," he says.

He is also quick to deflect the inevitable backlash from hawkish critics. "An Israeli friend said it was ironic that J Street was being attacked by hardliners because a few Arab-Americans had contributed to their cause. These same hardliners were also saying that the Arab world must reach out and declare their interest in peace. Their arguments don't stand up."

The American Task Force on Palestine's Hussein Ibish also welcomes the cross-cultural dialogue now taking place. "We need to cultivate a clear understanding that our relationship with the pro-Israel Jewish lobby is not a zero-sum one, in the same way that the Israeli-Palestinian relationship is not zero-sum one either," he says. "All of us require the same thing: a negotiated two-state agreement allowing for Israel and Palestine to live side-by-side in peace and security."

IF ONLY THE PATH TO MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING WERE SO SIMPLE. J Street's growing influence has not gone down well with many conservative pro-Israel supporters. *Commentary's* Noah Pollak has called the group "contemptible, dishonest and anti-Israeli"; James Kirchick of *The New Republic* called them "the Surrender Lobby"; Michael Goldfarb of *The Weekly Standard* said they were "obsequious to terrorists and hostile to Israel". Alan Dershowitz has labelled J Street "the dark side" and "McCarthyist."

Even Israeli Ambassador to the U.S., Michael Oren, stirred controversy last summer when he refused to attend J Street's inaugural conference (unlike the Jordanian ambassador, who came and delivered an address, and U.S. National Security Advisor James Jones). Late last year he also told a group of rabbis that J Street's policies endangered Israel.

To be fair, Oren has since softened his stance and commended the group for its positions on the Goldstone report and Iran. But there are plenty of other detractors to fill his shoes while he plays nice. A host of right-wing, pro-Israel commentators expressed alarm at J Street's willingness to take donations from

Arabs and Muslims, claiming this undermined the organisation's commitment to the state of Israel.

These sorts of vitriolic attacks come with territory according to Jeremy Ben-Ami, J Street's Executive Director. "A part of the Jewish community in the United States and some people in Israel are intolerant of people who disagree with them," he told Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*. "That intolerance immediately flips to 'you're anti-Israel', 'you're a Muslim-lover', or 'you're Muslim'. These are things that they call me, and this is what some of them call Barack Obama. It has to change, both in the politics here, and in the right-wing of the American-Jewish community."

WASHINGTON SQUABBLES ASIDE, THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE is how much emerging progressive lobby groups, which support a tough-love approach to U.S.-Israel diplomacy as it attempts to counter the more extreme elements of the spectrum, will manage to shape Obama's Middle East policy.

Groups such as J Street and Americans for Peace Now, another moderate Washington-based lobby group, were strongly supportive when the White House rebuked Benjamin Netanyahu over Israeli plans to build 1,600 new homes in East Jerusalem last March. However, when President Obama failed to mention settlement building after his Washington meeting with Netanyahu last July, the reaction was less polarised.

"I had fair warning that this visit would be different than the last, reportedly testy, encounter between these two leaders,"

"If convening the peace talks is Obama's Plan A, my only hope is that he has Plan B waiting in the desk drawer," says James Zogby. "What this Israeli government is constitutionally capable of giving is too little for the Palestinians to accept. And the Palestinians are too divided for the Palestinian Authority leadership to be able to accept anything less than a two-state solution based on 1967 borders, with a removal of settlements, an Arab capital in East Jerusalem, and a resolution of the refugee crisis.

"The only chance that progress can be made is if, after months of no progress, the White House turns to Plan B, which includes an American proposal, and pressure and incentives evenly distributed on both parties."

"Despite being dealt a truly dreadful hand, I think it's clear that Obama really wants to solve this problem," adds Nick Bunzl, of Israel Policy Forum (IPF), another moderate, Washington-based American Jewish lobby group. "What we need is three strong and courageous leaders working together. Obama must



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says James Zogby. "So I should have been prepared for the fact that tough love would be replaced by just plain love. I just wasn't prepared for how much love. I found the apparent public pass Netanyahu received on settlements, the U.S. threat to boycott a summit on Middle East non-proliferation, and all the 'unwaverings' and 'unbreakables' a bit too much to ingest."

But Ori Nir, a spokesperson for Americans For Peace Now, thinks the Netanyahu-Obama spat was overhyped from start to finish. "What we should be focusing on is whether Obama and his administration can get Netanyahu to extend the moratorium on settlement building," he says. "And whether, when the sides reach the inevitable deadlock, Obama has the will to intervene to keep moving the ball forward toward peace."

"At the current stage, building trust is crucial," adds Robert Wexler, President of the moderate Washington-based Center for Middle East Peace and Economic Cooperation. "Extending the moratorium would send a clear message to the Palestinians that Israelis are serious about peace negotiations."

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT WILL HAVE HIS WORK CUT OUT TO ACHIEVE THESE OBJECTIVES. Cajoling Netanyahu and Abbas into talks may have been a minor breakthrough for Obama, but he will surely have to re-intensify his efforts in the months to come. Evidence of progress is crucial as he rallies international efforts to isolate Iran, but getting the two sides to agree to anything is going to be a tall order.

push Abbas and Netanyahu as far as possible, and then offer a concrete plan. The Arab Peace Initiative would be a good starting framework."

AS THE PEACE PROCESS STUTTERS, rational thinking from Washington opinion-shapers may be swallowed in a sea of rhetoric. But at this stage, any ideas that can help sustain constructive dialogue are welcome. As Obama attempts to bridge the chasm between governments, moderate lobby groups on both sides of the divide now have something constructive to offer, both to each other, to the American President, and to anyone else willing to listen.

The hope is that a shift to the middle ground is an inevitable response to the traditional zero-sum approach that has plagued this seemingly never-ending conflict. The vast majority of Palestinians despair of the ongoing occupation, settlement expansion and painful separation. Enlightened Palestinians are keen to assure Jews that they support Israeli nationhood. Consistently evinced, this message clearly finds favour among the Jewish community, both in Israel and in the U.S.

The question now is whether Obama can build on this nascent spirit of mutual understanding in Washington. If this were to translate into a more cohesive U.S. policy, progress might finally become more than a pipe dream. Whether that happens in the latest round of talks, or at some other point in the future, he will have earned his Nobel Prize ten times over. **3**