

COMMENTARY

No.196

Thursday, 22 May 2014

American Jews Must Support, Not Hinder, Kerry's Efforts

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I am one of those who certainly support J Street's ongoing efforts to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace, and I applaud their repeated outreach calling on congressional leaders and Jewish groups to support Secretary of State John Kerry's peace offensive. I am puzzled though by J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami's call for financial assistance to "help send more pro-Israel, pro-peace candidates to Congress and stand-up to the personal attacks on Kerry."

Regardless of how well-intended, there are three major concerns over Ben-Ami's appeal:

To begin with, anyone who follows Congress' deliberations and sentiments regarding the Israeli-Palestinian peace process witnesses overwhelming support of Israel, and many congressmen have called on the Obama administration not to pressure Israel to make concessions it does not wish to make voluntarily.

The problem here is not that there is no congressional support for Israel, but there are not many who specifically support Kerry's peace efforts, as stated in Ben-Ami's call. What this sadly means is that American Jews should elect only representatives that support a certain policy related to Israel and that should be the sole criteria that would qualify them to be elected.

The message that this sends, especially to non-Jewish voters, is that Israel, and only what is good for Israel (albeit from different ideological perspectives), is what should be the litmus test for old or new representatives. What this misguided approach does is reinforce the notion that Congress is in Israel's pocket, serving one pro-Israeli interest group or another.

The second problem with Ben-Ami's appeal is that congressional elections will be held toward the end of the year, and all new and veteran members of Congress will effectively start working at the end of January 2015. Considering the urgency to make some serious progress in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, how will the election of "pro-peace candidates" now help Kerry's efforts, when time is of the essence?

There is a desperate need to make progress at this very juncture in the negotiations. Not that I expect a comprehensive peace agreement will be achieved within the next twelve months, but if there is no significant progress to keep the Israelis and the Palestinians engaged and hopeful, I seriously doubt that the negotiations will continue for another year.

Ben-Ami himself reaffirmed in his own words that time is critical when he stated: "The next couple of months will be a decisive moment for the peace and security of Israel. As Kerry prepares to roll out his framework agreement, we cannot afford to stand idly by..."

To that end, J Street should rally current members of Congress in support of Kerry's tireless efforts and present each and every one with the terrible prospect of a new conflagration if Kerry's efforts fail.

Every congressman should be hearing not only from representatives of the strongly conservative-leaning American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), who blindly supports the current Israeli policy of intransigence, but also from the heads of the plethora of major Jewish organizations who fully support Kerry's efforts.

The third problem is that although J Street touts itself as an "organization that primarily focuses on non-partisan education and advocacy on important national issues," it has done little to educate members of congress with the real conflicting issues between Israel and the Palestinians. It is not enough for a congressman to hear from a lobbyist why he or she should support what is best for Israel.

To educate these representatives about the real issues that separate Israelis from Palestinians, they should be invited to see and listen to Israelis and Palestinians discussing the perils of no peace. They should witness the plight of the Palestinians under occupation and understand why continuing occupation dangerously erodes Israel's moral standing, which affects every Jew regardless of their place of residence.

J Street must counter AIPAC's argument that Israel is under siege, surrounded by enemies seeking its destruction. This argument has been effective on Capitol Hill, and instead of pushing for peace now by supporting Kerry's efforts, they are unwittingly contributing to Israel's self-destructive policies.

The fact is, despite AIPAC's best efforts in Washington, Israel is becoming increasingly isolated in the international arena. The potential failure of the current negotiations will squarely fall on AIPAC's and its surrogates' shoulders.

J Street must challenge AIPAC on its own turf and demonstrate that the preservation of Israel as a viable and secure state rests on peace even though it requires painful concessions. Regardless of how painful these concessions may be, they will pale in comparison to the self-inflicted wounds that Netanyahu's policies are leading to.

J Street is an organization worthy of support by every person who cares about Israel's future and about ensuring that the American-Israeli bond continues to grow stronger. No one, however, should take that for granted.

The US and the West in general are running out of patience and soon there will come the time when Israel can no longer count on their automatic political support, not to mention a host of other collaborative relations critical to Israel's national security and well-being.

The monumental time, energy and political capital that Kerry has and continues to invest must not be squandered by so-called Jewish leaders who are sitting on their cushy chairs 10,000 miles away and counsel no concessions at the expense of Israeli blood.

They should go not only to Israel but also to the occupied territories and experience the life of a Palestinian, deprived of his personal freedom, with no opportunity and no hope for a better future. What will they expect from him to do?

Israel is creating its own time bomb through self-destructive policies, and every American Jew who does not raise his or her voice in support of the peace process is complicit in the bloodshed that will inescapably unfold.

Every congressional candidate needs money to run for office and that is legitimate. But none should take a dime if it is conditioned upon supporting any political position that affects Israel one way or the other.

They must be educated, not bought, in order to become conscientious of the high stakes involved that will come from failure.

They must understand that Israel's very existence rests on peace with the Palestinians.

They must act accordingly if they truly care not only about Israel but the Palestinians as well, because the Israelis' and Palestinians' futures are intertwined and neither can live in peace and security without the other.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal.

Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/american-jews-must-support-not-hinder-kerrys-efforts/>

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