

The First Word: When lobbies collide

Contributed by Jonathan Tobin , THE JERUSALEM POST
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With a new Israeli government about to be put in place, supporters of the US-Israel alliance are preparing for possible conflict between the soon-to-be prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu and President Barack Obama. But their battles won't be the only fight concerning Israel in Washington this year. Nor will it necessarily be the nastiest.

Instead, the real action may concern the coming conflict between two groups that, though both proclaim themselves "pro-Israel," in fact represent very different points of view about US foreign policy. One is the coalition of groups led by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) that sees its purpose as supporting the government of Israel no matter who may lead it. The other is composed of critics of the Jewish state who believe pressure on Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians is the best form of friendship.

The most conspicuous member of the latter group is the lobby group J Street which sees itself as a Jewish model along the lines of the moveon.org activist group that helped transform and propel the American Left to victory in the past two election cycles. Having labeled AIPAC as a creature of the Republicans and in thrall to the Christian Right, J Street and its fellow travelers, such as the more establishment-oriented Israel Policy Forum, entered 2009 expecting to use their connections in the Obama administration to change the way Israel is discussed in Washington.

Their belief that the main obstacle to peace was an Israeli refusal to make further concessions on territory and settlements to the Palestinians seemed to be more in sync with the return of Clinton administration veterans to positions of influence now that the Democrats are back in power. As a result, J Street's leadership anticipates making progress toward its long-term goal of supplanting AIPAC as the voice that the White House and Congress take most seriously when measures concerning Israel are debated.

But despite these advantages, the Obama era got off to a rough start for J Street. Almost alone among Jewish groups, the left-wing lobby conspicuously opposed Israel's recent counteroffensive into Gaza, and did so in its customary self-righteous style which sought to brand all those who differed as opposed to peace. This stand reinforced the group's image as extremists and exposed its posturing about being more representative of American Jewish opinion than AIPAC as fraudulent.

Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the Gaza fighting, J Street was undaunted. Obama's naming George Mitchell as his Middle East envoy seemed to vindicate the Left's call for more US intervention in the moribund peace process. And the prospect of a Netanyahu-led coalition in Jerusalem may also increase its influence. Since the Likud leader is deeply unpopular in official circles in Washington, J Street can look forward to being able to put AIPAC at a disadvantage since it will find itself obligated to defend his government as a matter of course.

YET THE FIRST REAL fight of 2009 over Middle East policy may not concern Netanyahu or even the more controversial elements of his cabinet. Instead, the collision of the "pro-Israel" lobbies may have more to do with the Palestinians than anything the Israelis themselves are doing.

The announcement that the US would donate approximately \$900 million to help rebuild Gaza was not initially considered controversial. Yet mindful of its pledge not to deal with the terrorists running Gaza and to support the Palestinian Authority, the administration promised the money would not go to Hamas. Instead it would be funneled through the PA and its highly respected Prime Minister Salaam Fayad as well as through humanitarian groups.

But this plan was unrealistic. Fayad soon resigned, ending the brief experiment in trying to have a Palestinian leader who was actually interested in developing the economy. His problems illustrate how misguided groups like J Street were about the Palestinians' willingness to make peace. Palestinian politicians who don't kill Jews are not as popular as those who do. But even with Fayad, the PA has no power in Gaza.

As for humanitarian outlets in Gaza, the prime recipient of such money would be the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, the UN body whose sole purpose is to not only help the Palestinians but to perpetuate the misery of those still classified as refugees from the 1948 War of Independence and their descendants. UNRWA is heavily infiltrated by Hamas operatives. Aid given to it would either be directed to Hamas-oriented causes or stolen outright by the group. The prospect of nearly a billion dollars in US taxpayer funds being poured into Gaza, with much of it likely to wind up in the hands of terrorists, is not likely to go without protest. Indeed questions are already being asked about whether the aid should be conditioned not only on complete accountability about its use but on more general policy questions such as the cessation of rocket fire and the release of kidnapped soldier Gilad Schalit, who has been in Hamas captivity since June

2006.

This past week, Nevada Democrat Rep. Shelly Berkley wrote to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asking that restrictions be placed on the disbursement of these funds. If, as anticipated, this move is supported by other members of Congress of both parties and some pro-Israel groups, we can expect a serious debate on this point in which J Street and its allies will seek to portray such conditions as being anti-peace.

Indeed, this conflict may well resemble similar arguments in the 1990s during the heyday of the doomed Oslo peace process, when efforts to point out that the billions being poured into the hands of Yasser Arafat and the PA were not only being stolen but were being used to finance anti-Israel incitement as well as terrorism were dismissed by the Clinton administration and the Jewish Left as "anti-peace." This time, the realization that the US is funding what amounts to a massive "stimulus" package for equally dubious Palestinian recipients may inspire opposition that is more broadly-based.

If so, we will have another chance to see if J Street's strident advocacy of appeasement of a Palestinian leadership that is as unlikely to promote peace as was Arafat is as popular as it imagines it to be. As was the case a decade ago with Arafat, no amount of blather about peace and investing in hope will whitewash the reputations of terrorists. Nor will the current ascendancy of fellow liberals in Washington be enough to grant legitimacy to a "pro-Israel" group whose main efforts are geared toward undermining solidarity with the Jewish state.

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