



ISRAEL MATTERS!

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PM on Egypt: Israel Must 'Prepare for Worst'

Israel shares the world's hopes that Egypt will succeed in its quest for genuine reform, but unlike other democracies it cannot just hope for the best, but must prepare for the



worst, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu (photo, left) said recently. Speaking to the annual Jerusalem meeting of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Netanyahu said that part of preparing for the worst was "to alert leaders and policy-makers around the world of possible dangers that may lie ahead, not be-

cause I want them to materialize – I don't – but because I have a responsibility to do whatever I can to increase the chances that they don't materialize."

With these words the prime minister was taking on criticism articulated in recent days – most notably by New York Times columnists Thomas Friedman and Roger Cohen – that Israel has been on the wrong side of history in not fervently applauding the recent events in Cairo. "No one knows what the future in Egypt will bring," Netanyahu said. "People in Washington don't know, and people in Tehran don't know, and – this may be hard for some of you – but even columnists in The New York Times don't know." Netanyahu said that while changing the status quo led to a much better situation in Europe in 1989 with the collapse of the Iron Curtain, the same cannot be said of the Russian Revolution in 1917, or the Iranian revolution in 1979. Even more recently, he said, most of the world applauded the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon in 2005. But just a few years later, Hezbollah – "a terror organization that respects no human rights, that crushes human rights into the dust" – has taken over the country.

Ultimately, the Egyptians themselves will determine their own fate, Netanyahu said, "but Israel cannot profess neutrality about the outcome, because above all, we want the future Egyptian government to remain committed to peace with Israel." Netanyahu said he wanted "every sin-

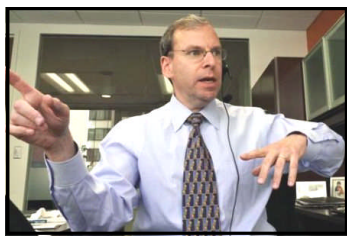
gle Egyptian" to know that Israel was committed to peace with them and the country's other neighbors. Two-thirds of Egyptians, about 50 million people, were born after the 1979 peace agreement and don't remember what life was like before the agreement was signed, he said. All of Israel's neighbors should value what the peace agreement contributed to Israel and Egypt, the prime minister added.

"I have no doubt that maintaining the peace, deepening it, is in the interest of Egypt, and I hope this will accompany the Egyptian effort to achieve a free and democratic society as they pursue their reform," he said. "While we wish the Egyptian people full success as they seek to forge a new future, we make no apologies for our fervent hope that they remain committed to peace." Netanyahu said that in recent weeks a number of accepted truths had been shattered, including that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the central problem in the region. The US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks showed that the main concern of Arab governments was not Israel and the Palestinians, but Iran, while the protests currently rocking the Arab world showed that the main problem bothering the Arab masses was the quality of their own lives, and not the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Even as much of the conventional wisdom regarding the region was falling by the wayside, Netanyahu said there was still "one truth that has yet to emerge: that it is not Israel that does not wish to advance negotiations to secure the final peace with the Palestinians, it is the Palestinians. They don't want to negotiate. I hope that changes."

Speaking just before Netanyahu, US Ambassador James Cunningham (photo, right) said the US was "not naive" about the emerging situation in Egypt, was "not in retreat, and does not underestimate the difficulties." Acknowledging that there has been "understandable concern" in the region about the "constancy" of American policy, "we have not abandoned our allies," Cunningham said. The ambassador also pledged that the Obama administration's "dedication to Israel's security and legitimacy will remain unshaken as we move through the weeks and months ahead." (JPost)

J Street: What is Pro-Israel?



[JTA] The detractors of J Street, the “pro-Israel, pro-peace” lobbying organization, like to portray the organization’s leader, Jeremy Ben-Ami (photo), as so far to the left of mainstream American Jewish opinion as to be out of

bounds. If they think Ben-Ami is too much of a lefty on Israel, just wait till they meet J Street’s rank and file.

At the organization’s March annual conference in Washington, which organizers say drew 2,400 people, the crowd was emphatic in its insistence on Palestinian rights, offered only weak, scattered applause for an Obama administration official’s line about America’s strong support for Israeli security, and complained that more Palestinians should have been featured on conference panels.

Activists from the traditional pro-Israel camp have seized upon such sentiment as evidence that J Street is not pro-Israel but pro-Palestinian. They question the organization’s funding sources, its association with certain Arab and far-left organizations, and its advocacy of U.S. pressure on Israel.

But in J Street’s view, this misses the point. For Ben-Ami and J Street supporters, being pro-Palestinian is not incompatible with being pro-Israel. In their mind, standing up for Palestinian rights, criticizing Israel’s policies in the West Bank and advocating for more pressure on the Israeli government is a way of supporting Israel by helping, or forcing, Israel to become the kind of place they believe it ought to be. “We don’t view this as a zero-sum conflict,” Ben-Ami said Feb. 28 in a question-and-answer session with reporters. “You can be pro-Israel and be an advocate for the rights of the Palestinian people.”

This approach explains why many audience members ap-

plauded when a questioner on one panel asked why the United States doesn’t impose economic sanctions on Israel if Israeli settlements in the West Bank are a violation of the Geneva Convention. It’s why they clapped when panelist Marwan Bishara, an Al Jazeera political analyst, wondered aloud why Dennis Ross, the Obama administration’s senior envoy on Middle East issues, was invited to the conference at all. It’s why the introduction of New York Times columnist Roger Cohen, a fierce critic of U.S. aid to Israel, drew enthusiastic whooping before he had even uttered a word. For this crowd, the Israeli government is to blame for the lack of peace in the Middle East.

Knesset Committee to Discuss J Street

The Knesset Immigration, Absorption and Public Diplomacy Committee announced that a hearing on J Street, which calls itself a “pro-Israel, pro-peace” organization, will soon be held.

Americans for Peace Now said it was outraged by the hearing.

“After aggressively attacking dissenting voices in Israel and trying to suppress diversity at home, some Israeli legislators are now extending their intimidation campaign across the ocean,” Americans for Peace Now CEO Debra DeLee said in a recent statement. “The attempt to delegitimize an American organization that supports Israel and works tirelessly to engage tens of thousands of Americans in pro-Israel activity is bad for Israel.”

“Israel needs all the support it can get from Americans of all political persuasions. It cannot afford to cast doubt on the love and devotion of hundreds of thousands of American friends, whose vision for Israel is deeply anchored in values of peace, justice, equality and democracy.” The committee, chaired by Danny Danon of the Likud Party, will invite the Israeli lawmakers who attended J Street’s annual meeting in March to testify.

“I asked for the hearing not because of the content of J Street’s beliefs, but because I want to look into the commitment of Jewish love and support for Israel,” Kadima lawmaker Otniel Schneller told The Jerusalem Post. “If they don’t love and support Israel, then they should not present themselves as pro-Israel.”

Critics have rapped J Street for criticizing Israel’s policies in the West Bank and being pro-Palestinian. (JTA)

Their main beef is with the traditional pro-Israel camp, not with the Palestinians.

“I would have liked to see an Israeli uprising of the people against our government,” Ron Pundak, director general of the Peres Center for Peace, said in a panel discussion Feb. 27 about the implications of the uprisings in the Arab world. “We don’t have today an Israeli partner or leadership,” Pundak said to applause. The Israeli people should “get rid of this terrible government which today is governing Israel.”

Ben-Ami wasn’t entirely comfortable with every speaker at the conference. But borrowing a line long recited by the New Israel Fund—another Jewish organization that has come under heavy criticism for

its support of Palestinian groups and the Israeli organizations that help them—Ben-Ami said J Street is committed to having an open conversation, including with parties with which it disagrees.

That’s why, he said, he invited Jewish Voice for Peace, an organization classified by the Anti-Defamation League as one of the top 10 anti-Israel groups in the United States and which promotes the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement targeting Israel, even though, Ben-Ami says, he and J Street are against the BDS campaign. “The conversation within the Jewish community will be best

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Israel's ZAKA International Rescue Unit to Aid Japan After Earthquake and Tsunami

The ZAKA International Rescue Unit announced it was sending a team of trained volunteers from Israel, and another based in Hong Kong, to help the search and rescue efforts in Japan, following the 8.9-magnitude earthquake and tsunami that rocked the country.

The specially trained ZAKA volunteers will join the international search and rescue efforts in an effort to save as many lives as possible. The UN-recognized, Israel-based ZAKA International Rescue Unit, has assisted at natural disasters around the world, including Haiti, the first Israeli delegation to arrive on the scene, the tsunami in Thailand and the hurricane in New Orleans. [Haaretz.]

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served if you have different points of view," he said.

If any Jewish voices were absent from the conference, it was those on the right side of the political spectrum. Even centrist voices were few and far between. Their absence became glaring as panelists at session after session agreed with and applauded one another. The lack of diversity did not go unnoticed by some of the younger people at the conference.

They could have used some more right-leaning speakers to balance their perspective," said Avi Fine, a student at Carleton College. "There wasn't enough disagreeing," said another student, Mika Gang of Toronto's Ryerson University. "It would be cool to have more right-wing, more dissenting viewpoints."

In the lineup at J Street, the most right-wing speakers seemed to be Ross, who represents a White House criticized by many American Jews as too left-wing on Israel, and Nachman Shai, an Israeli Knesset member from Kadima, whose centrist party leads the opposition to the right-wing coalition of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Judging from the panelists and the crowd's reaction to their remarks, even Ben-Ami would find himself on the right end of the J Street spectrum, with his positions supporting sanctions against Iran and opposing the BDS movement, and his red line against J Street associating with those who deny Israel's right to exist.

Ben-Ami told reporters, "This is unapologetically and unabashedly a pro-Israel organization that believes in the state for the Jewish people."

One of the few conference sessions featuring sharp disagreement was about the BDS movement. Rebecca Vilkomerson, the executive director of Jewish Voice for Peace, compared the campaign's tactics to those of Gandhi, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Cesar Chavez, saying it's "the most hopeful strategy we can engage in."

Kenneth Bob, the president of Ameinu, a labor Zionist group whose motto is "Liberal values, progressive Israel," argued that BDS seeks to displace Israel, not simply end the occupation of the West Bank. He said he sees "no common cause" with BDS leaders.

The crowd at the conference, the organization's second since its inception about three years ago, was hardly monolithic. It included men and women in kipot and the odd woman in a hijab, Israeli politicians and Palestinian journalists, gray-haired rabbis from California and college students from Vermont, including non-Jewish ones.

The conference's location at the same site as the annual spring policy conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee—the Washington Convention Center—begged comparisons between the two. J Street sees itself as the left-wing alternative to AIPAC, while AIPAC insists it is centrist, not right wing, and has been waging a behind-the-scenes battle to malign and sideline J Street ever since its creation.

The battle in the Jewish community over whether or not J Street is kosher extends to the halls of Congress and the Knesset. The Israeli Knesset members who came to the conference were slammed in the Israeli media for their decision to participate, and Michael Oren, the Israeli ambassador to the United States, declined to attend.

Though some 60 Congress members came to the organization's gala dinner Feb. 28, it was a fraction of the number that regularly show up for AIPAC's gala dinner.

One former J Street ally in Congress, Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.), publicly severed ties with the organization in January when J Street petitioned the Obama administration not to veto a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlements. He called J Street "so open-minded about what constitutes support for Israel that its brains have fallen out," saying in a statement, "America really does need a smart, credible, politically active organization that is as aggressively pro-peace as it is pro-Israel. Unfortunately, J Street ain't it."

Nevertheless, by any measure, the massing of 2,400 people for a conference by a 3-year-old Jewish organization is a sign of notable success and an indication that in the future this "pro-Israel, pro-peace" lobby may have greater influence over U.S.-Israeli issues—or, at least, the discourse within the Jewish community.

Ben Ami says AIPAC should recognize that. "I think the time has come for them to agree to take the stage with us and with these issues," Ben-Ami said of AIPAC. "We are a legitimate, established part of the communal conversation."