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The Dead End of Liberal American Zionism



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

In 2014, we wrote an article titled “The Blind Alley of J Street and Liberal American Zionism.” At the time, Benjamin Netanyahu was in his sixth continuous year as Israel’s prime minister, while President Obama was well into his second term. And J Street, an emerging organization of Jews aligned with the Democratic administration, had momentum as “the political home for pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans.”

From the outset, ever since its founding in 2007, J Street has implicitly offered itself as a liberal alternative to the hardline American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), which was established more than four decades earlier. An avowed purpose of J Street has been to

seek a humane resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict while maintaining fervent allegiance to Israel as “the Jewish state.”

In the 10 years since our article, J Street — at pains to reconcile the contradictions between its “pro-Israel” bond and the increasing Israeli brutality toward Palestinians — has remained committed to the basic goal (or mirage) of a “Jewish and democratic” state. The war on Gaza since October has heightened those contradictions, thrusting into clearer view Israel’s actual creation-and-expansion story, illuminating the violent repression and expulsion of Palestinian people.

A significant number of American Jews are now willing to challenge the Zionist project while pointing out that it is inherently fated to suppress the human rights of non-Jews in Palestine. Speaking at a protest near Sen. Chuck Schumer’s home in Brooklyn last month, Naomi Klein [said](#): “We don’t need or want the false idol of Zionism. We want freedom from the project that commits genocide in our name.”

Standard claims about “democratic Israel” have fallen into notable disrepute on U.S. college campuses, with both Jewish and non-Jewish students this spring protesting against the manifest torture and slaughter of Gaza’s population. Rumbblings were audible a decade ago, when the Jewish student group Hillel was roiled with a dispute over whether its national leadership could ban Hillel chapters on college campuses from hosting strong critics of Israeli policies. That dispute, we wrote at the time, “emerged from a long history of pressure on American Jews to accept Zionism and a ‘Jewish state’ as integral to Judaism.” Back then, some Jewish students — “pushing to widen the bounds of acceptable discourse” — were “challenging powerful legacies of conformity.”

This year, in mid-February, J Street issued a [statement](#) addressed to President Biden that urged him to propose recognition of a “demilitarized” Palestinian state as a solution leading to acceptance of Israel by Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region. This is a rough equivalent of fiddling with the roof of a structure built on a grievously cracked foundation: the forced exile of non-Jews from much of Palestine — what is now Israel — and the refusal of their right of return, while maintaining a right of return (including to the occupied West Bank) for whoever can claim Jewish identity.

Whether Jewish or not, many Americans have come to question the arrogant absurdity of enabling an American in Brooklyn to claim Palestine while denying any such claim by ethnically cleansed Palestinians. In concordance with other Zionist groups, J Street presupposes that Palestinians should settle for areas designated by the Israeli colonizers (who

must not be called colonizers), while they reserve a “right of return” only for themselves and their coreligionists.

J Street offers weak tea with its proposal for “a conflict-ending agreement in which Israel also ultimately recognizes Palestinian statehood.” Under such a scenario, Palestinians as a group would dedicate themselves to cooperation, non-resistance, and — in effect, given the one-sided requirement of “demilitarization” — acceptance of Zionist rights to control Palestine.

J Street’s idea of a fix is that the U.S. government will initiate a plan for “specific steps Palestinians must take to revitalize and reinvent their government with new leadership committed to addressing corruption, demilitarization, renouncing terror and violence, and reaffirming recognition of Israel.” The plan includes “specific steps Israel must take to ease occupation and improve daily life on the West Bank, crack down on settler violence and address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.” And President Biden would offer “American recognition of Palestinian statehood, reaffirmation of the Arab Peace Initiative and security guarantees for all parties, commitments to supporting international law” — and finally, “a UN Security Council Resolution affirming global and unanimous support for the vision, the process and the parameters for negotiation leading to a final status agreement and admission of Palestine as a full member state in the United Nations.”

The J Street “comprehensive diplomatic initiative” proposal is remarkable for what it does not do. The proposal’s failure to acknowledge Israel’s taking of East Jerusalem and West Bank lands for Jewish settlement (even increasing since its war on Gaza began) dodges realities of a Palestine that is riven with settlements of Israeli citizens – a strategy since 1967 to fragment Palestinian populations into de facto Israeli versions of Bantustans.

The number of Israelis who’ve settled in East Jerusalem and occupied West Bank has increased 35% — to 700,000 — since our article 10 years ago, making it that much harder to realistically imagine a “two-state solution.” There is nothing in J Street’s new “bold” vision that conceives of Israeli ceding land it has taken for “Judaizing” increasing portions of Palestine.

Liberal American Zionists and U.S. administrations have sometimes objected to the latest illegal and immoral “facts on the ground” imposed by Israel, only to later accept them as immutable facts that could not possibly be rolled back. And so, as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights recently reported, a “drastic acceleration in settlement building is exacerbating long-standing patterns of oppression, violence and discrimination against Palestinians.”

The UN human rights official, Volker Türk, reported that “the policies of the current Israeli Government appear aligned, to an unprecedented extent, with the goals of the Israeli settler movement to expand long-term control over the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and to steadily integrate this occupied territory into the State of Israel.”

Meanwhile, J Street’s proposal for a “demilitarized” Palestinian state matches Netanyahu’s plan for Israel to retain “security control” of all of Palestine to the Jordan River.

Israeli scholar David Shulman, in the midst of this latest crisis, writes: “The wave of anti-Israel feeling that is engulfing large numbers of people in the Western world has emerged not merely from the Gaza war, with its unbearable civilian casualties and now mass starvation. What that wave reflects, more profoundly, is the justified disgust with the ongoing occupation, its seemingly eternal and ever more brutal continuation, and the policies of massive theft and apartheid that are its very essence.”

The crux of our commentary 10 years ago holds even more terribly true today, after another decade of systemic, often-lethal cruelty toward Palestinian people: J Street continues its attempt to create a humane lobby group for Israel, without questioning the manifestly unjust — and thus perpetually unstable — settlement and expulsion project that created Israel in the first place and has sustained it ever since. In essence, while presenting itself as a caring alternative to Netanyahu-brand extremism, liberal Zionism’s yearning for “peace” assumes perpetuation of basic Israeli transgressions and gains over the last 75 years, while calling for acceptance and submission from a defeated and colonized people.

Ten years ago, we wrote of American Jews’ acquiescence to Jewish nationalism: “During the 1950s and later decades, the solution for avoiding an ugly rift was a kind of preventive surgery. Universalist, prophetic Judaism became a phantom limb of American Jewry, after an amputation in service of the ideology of an ethnic state in the Middle East. Pressures for conformity became overwhelming among American Jews, whose success had been predicated on the American ideal of equal rights regardless of ethnic group origin.”

Long story short, the dream of humanistic Zionism is collapsing, but — like other entrenched Jewish groups and a declining number of American Jews — J Street is desperate to keep the fantasy on life support. The nostrum of a two-state solution for the small tormented land of Palestine is more and more flimsy, but organizations like J Street and a large majority of elected Democrats refuse to concede that it has been made nonsensical by Israel’s ever-expanding settlements and escalating Jewish nationalism comfortable with inflicting genocide on Palestinian people.

We were touched, reading through successive J Street statements after the surprise and devastating Oct. 7 raid on “Gaza Envelope” Israeli settlements, causing 1,200 deaths and 240 kidnapped. Their first responses were expressions of solidarity with stunned Israelis, beginning with “J Street Stands with Israelis Facing Hamas Terror Onslaught.” Anguish was evident as J Street statements changed their tone, when Israel escalated assaults on Palestinian civilians. Alarmed at the Israeli military’s blockading and devastating Gaza, and also intensifying paramilitary settler raids on Palestinian communities in the West Bank, J Street pleaded repeatedly that the U.S. restrain Israel — to rescue J Street’s dream image of a humane and well-meaning Jewish state.

Unfortunately, these words that we wrote in 2014 have remained accurate, with steadily horrific consequences: “Every conceptual lane of J Street equates being ‘pro-Israel’ with maintaining the doctrine of a state where Jews are more equal than others. Looking to the past, that approach requires treating the historic Zionist conquest as somewhere between necessary and immaculate. Looking at the present and the future, that approach sees forthright opposition to the preeminence of Jewish rights as extreme or otherwise beyond the pale. And not ‘pro-Israel.’”

J Street’s current self-definition begins: “J Street organizes pro-Israel, pro-peace, pro-democracy Americans to promote U.S. policies that embody our deeply held Jewish and democratic values and that help secure the State of Israel as a democratic homeland for the Jewish people.”

In an unpublished autobiography, former Zionist Baltimore Rabbi Morris S. Lazaron wrote of political Zionism’s “nationalist philosophy expressed in this country under the guise of promoting ‘Jewishness,’ ‘Jewish unity,’ ‘Jewish education.’” And he summed up: “Finally I came to the conclusion that the Zionists were using Jewish need only to exploit their political goals. Every sacred feeling of the Jew, every instinct of humanity, every deep-rooted anxiety for family, every cherished memory became an instrument to be used for the promotion of the Zionist cause.”

Jews are going to have to make a painful reappraisal of the project that imposes a “Jewish” state in Palestine. Understanding our willful blindness and self-deception that facilitate the abuse of the non-Jews of Palestine will mean giving up the evasive palliative of pseudo-humanistic posturing from groups like J Street. The essential fight against antisemitism cannot mean ongoing degradation and suppression of another people. After 75-plus years of violently taking, while piously talking of a desire for peace, the disconnect between that

ostensible peace-seeking and the assertion of Zionist control of the land will need to be resolved.

No matter how much it might be paved with good intentions, J Street serves as a well-trafficked avenue for liberal American Zionism that continues to support the subjugation of Palestinian people, with steady patterns of deadly violence. J Street has rigorously lobbied for the U.S. aid that provides Israel with the weaponry to inflict mass casualties.

“Since we launched J Street 15 years ago, we’ve supported *every* dollar of *every* U.S. security package to Israel,” J Street’s longtime president Jeremy Ben-Ami wrote in a May 9 email to supporters. As usual in lockstep with the Democratic White House, Ben-Ami went on to reassure supporters: “The decision to hold back certain weapons shipments is one the President doesn’t take lightly. And neither do we.”

J Street’s support for continuing huge quantities of military aid to Israel belies the organization’s humane pose. “U.S. aid to Israel must not be a blank check,” Ben-Ami wrote. “The Israeli government should be held to the same standards of all aid recipients, including requirements to uphold international law and facilitate humanitarian aid.” But those words appeared in the same email pointing out that J Street has always “supported every dollar” of U.S. military aid. Given that Israel has been flagrantly violating “international law” for decades — and had lethally blocked “humanitarian aid” in Gaza for more than six months by the time Congress approved \$17 billion in new military aid in late April — J Street’s blanket support for military aid to Israel epitomizes the extreme disjunctions in the organization’s doubletalk.

“Voices on the extreme left are slamming the President for failing to do enough and enabling a genocide, even if one might think they would consider this a step in the right direction,” Ben-Ami wrote — the implication being that it’s unreasonably extreme to demand an end to U.S. policies enabling genocide.

In 2024, “pro-Israel, pro-peace” is an oxymoron, with denial stretched to a breaking point. Israel is now what it is now, not a gaslit fantasy that backers of groups like J Street want to believe. To whistle past the graveyard of a humanistic Zionist dream requires holding onto the illusion that the problem is centered around Netanyahu and his even-farther-right government allies. But a country cannot be meaningfully separated from its society.

“Israel has hardened, and the signs of it are in plain view,” foreign correspondent Megan Stack wrote last week in an extraordinary *New York Times* opinion piece. “Dehumanizing language and promises of annihilation from military and political leaders. Polls that found wide support for the policies that have wreaked devastation and starvation in Gaza. Selfies of

Israeli soldiers preening proudly in bomb-crushed Palestinian neighborhoods. A crackdown on even mild forms of dissent among Israelis.”

The social fabric is anything but a fringe in control of the prime minister’s office and war cabinet. As Stack explained:

Israel’s slaughter in Gaza, the creeping famine, the wholesale destruction of neighborhoods — this, polling suggests, is the war the Israeli public wanted. A January survey found that 94 percent of Jewish Israelis said the force being used against Gaza was appropriate or even insufficient. In February, a poll found that most Jewish Israelis opposed food and medicine getting into Gaza. It was not Mr. Netanyahu alone but also his war cabinet members (including Benny Gantz, often invoked as the moderate alternative to Mr. Netanyahu) who unanimously rejected a Hamas deal to free Israeli hostages and, instead, began an assault on the city of Rafah, overflowing with displaced civilians.

Meanwhile, Stack added, “If U.S. officials understand the state of Israeli politics, it doesn’t show. Biden administration officials keep talking about a Palestinian state. But the land earmarked for a state has been steadily covered in illegal Israeli settlements, and Israel itself has seldom stood so unabashedly opposed to Palestinian sovereignty.”

Likewise, if J Street officials understand the state of Israeli politics, it doesn’t show. The organization’s officials also keep talking about a Palestinian state. But in reality, the “two-state solution” has become only a talking-point solution for liberal American Zionists, elected Democrats, and assorted pundits who keep trying to dodge what Israel has actually become.

Last week a founder of Human Rights Watch, Aryeh Neier, wrote: “I am now persuaded that Israel is engaged in genocide against Palestinians in Gaza.” It is a horrific truth that J Street’s leaders keep evading.

In 2024, the meaning of “pro-Israel, pro-peace” is macabre: J Street refuses to call for an end to U.S. military aid to Israel while that country continues to use American weapons and ammunition for mass murder and genocide.

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