



J Street Annual Conference “Defending Our Values: Fighting for Our Future”

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J Street, the liberal left-of-center Jewish pro-peace, pro-Israel organization held its sixth annual conference at the end of February in Washington, DC. Over 3,500 people attended the conference, including 1,200 young people from J Street U, a college and university organizing arm of J Street.

This was the biggest gathering of J Street delegates and supporters since the organization was established in 2008. It was also the first annual conference in the Trump era, as the organization known for its close ties with the Obama White House is now searching for ways to have an impact on the new Trump Administration and Congress, as well as on the broader Washington policy community.

J Street Competition with AIPAC during the Obama Years

Upon its founding, J Street was perceived as an alternative to the right-of-center American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) as well as the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. As such it promised to promote US leadership that would resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to speak for a segment of the American Jewish community that did not agree with AIPAC’s positions. It should be noted, however, that both organizations support a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Shortly after J Street’s establishment, President Barack Obama was elected and Democrats controlled both chambers of Congress. During this time J Street had almost unprecedented access. J Street viewed itself as a key part of the Obama Administration’s strategy on Israel and the moribund peace process. For eight years, J Street avidly supported President Obama’s policies on Israel and the peace process.

While J Street opposes Israel’s settlement expansion, AIPAC—while not supporting settlement expansion outright—has worked to blur the lines on settlement activity. In 2015 AIPAC [supported](#) an amendment to the trade promotion bill that would have protected Israeli settlements from the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. J Street opposed the amendment.

In December 2016, AIPAC strongly opposed [United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334](#). The resolution states that Israel’s settlement activity constitutes a “flagrant violation” of international law and has no “legal validity” and demands that Israel stop settlement activity. J Street welcomed the UNSC resolution and [supported](#) the Obama Administration’s decision to abstain on the resolution

J Street and AIPAC were on opposite sides regarding the nuclear agreement with Iran—the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). While J Street supports the agreement, AIPAC opposes the agreement, believing Iran poses a significant threat to US national security interests and to

Israel. It has effectively and successfully lobbied for [additional sanctions](#) on Iran due to that country's testing of its ballistic missile program. Those sanctions were announced by the Trump Administration on February 3, 2017.

However, with the election of Donald Trump as president, J Street is likely to find itself in the political wilderness as the organization and its views have little support from this conservative and strongly pro-Israel administration. President Trump has nominated David Friedman to be US Ambassador to Israel, who reportedly [had a hand](#) in removing support for the two-state solution from the Republican Party platform. J Street strongly opposes Friedman, who once referred to J Street supporters as "worse than kapos" (Jews who collaborated with the Nazis during World War II) and has lobbied against the organization to no avail. For the next eight years J Street likely will have no influence with the Trump Administration. It may continue to enjoy support from the more progressive pro-Israel, pro-peace members of Congress.

The Conference

The title of the conference aptly described the concern and opposition of J Street to President Trump's policies, both foreign and domestic. J Street supporters view Trump Administration policies as a threat to their values and goals both in the United States and in Israel. There is genuine concern among J Street supporters over Israel's settlement expansion, the erosion of civil liberties, the anti-immigration policies, including a ban on Muslims, and the administration's focus on defense spending at the expense of domestic programs and foreign assistance programs.

No Trump Administration officials nor Republican elected officials were present at the conference. Senior politicians on the US side were House Minority Leader Representative Nancy Pelosi (D-California), Senators Tim Kaine (D-Virginia), Chris Murphy (D-Connecticut), and Bernie Sanders (I-Vermont), and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. This slim showing of members of Congress was in marked contrast to AIPAC's annual conference, which draws nearly the entire US Congress as well as more than 10,000 members.

No representatives of the Israeli government or coalition were in attendance, either. Members of the Israeli parliamentary opposition participating included MK Omer Bar-Lev (Zionist Union), MK Tamar Zandberg (Meretz), and MK Ayman Odeh (Joint List). Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, who was advertised as a featured speaker, did not attend and was represented by the Chief of the PLO Delegation in Washington, Maen Areikat.

Plenary Sessions

Plenary Session One, "Aftershocks: What the Trump Era Means for Israel and the United States." The opening night plenary session on February 25 clearly set the tone for the rest of the conference as J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami, in his [speech](#) titled, "Defending Our Values, Fighting for Our Future," branded the organization as part of the opposition fighting against Donald Trump, his administration, and his policies. Ben-Ami called on the conference's delegates to fight and resist, not only regarding Trump's Middle East policies but on the president's domestic policies as well, including immigration, freedom of the press, and race relations. Ben-Ami did not shy away from criticizing the Israeli government and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's

policies. He reiterated the organization's stance in support of the Iran deal and the two-state solution, and against continued Israeli settlement activity. The loudest applause came when Ben-Ami attacked Trump's nominee for ambassador to Israel, New York bankruptcy attorney David Friedman. On the last day of the conference hundreds of delegates visited Capitol Hill and delivered a petition signed by more than 40,000 people opposing Friedman's nomination. Ben-Ami spoke of democratic and Jewish values being under attack in both the United States and Israel and emphasized that J Street's struggle is against what is happening now in both countries.

Plenary Session Two, "Conflicts, Chaos and Opportunity in the Middle East." This panel featured Senator Chris Murphy (D-Connecticut), Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* as moderator, and panelists Michele Flournoy, Center for New American Security, Ambassador Martin Indyk, Executive Vice President, Brookings, and Rob Malley, former Special Assistant to President Obama. Panelists discussed the prospects for a two-state solution and were not prepared to say the two-state solution was dead. Turning to the Iran nuclear deal, there was consensus among the panelists that the Trump Administration should reach out to Iran and remove bilateral sanctions; in turn, Iran would agree to back away from exploiting sectarian tensions and support Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

[Maen Areikat](#) was billed as the keynote speaker for this session. Areikat was very open in his criticism of the Trump Administration. He addressed the confusion over President Trump's one-state/two-state comment, noting that his office has not been approached by any Trump Administration official, except for the CIA Director who met with President Abbas. He stressed the Palestinians are ready to engage with this administration based on mutual respect. He criticized the Trump Administration for not articulating a strong stance opposing Israeli settlement expansion, which undercuts peace efforts. He cautioned against moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem, a very sensitive issue that the Trump Administration does not seem to understand fully. Areikat warned that moving the embassy would have very negative repercussions for Palestinians and the region. Concluding with thoughts on the peace process, Areikat repeated the aspirations of the Palestinian people: a secular, democratic, contiguous Palestinian state side-by-side with Israel.

Plenary Session Three, "Rising to the Challenge: American Jewish Leadership in the Trump Era," with a featured address by Senator Bernie Sanders. Senator Bernie Sanders [addressed](#) the third plenary session. The audience, comprised mostly of young people, waited with bated breath to hear him. It was worth the wait. He was greeted with two standing ovations and thunderous applause. Sanders was clear in his denunciation of Trump's weak condemnation of anti-Semitism and other bigotry, and made voluble assertions that Israelis and Palestinians deserve equal rights and dramatic dismissals of charges that criticism of Israel is anti-Israel or anti-Semitic.

Sanders applauded J Street for its fight for peace in the Middle East and its support for the Iran deal, which was an important achievement of the Obama Administration. He harshly criticized the war in Iraq, which was "a blunder" in every respect. It is easy to give speeches about going to war, Sanders proclaimed, but it is important to solve global conflicts without going to war, as through the Iran deal, which buttressed the security of America and Israel. Interestingly, Sanders spoke of his attachment to Israel, going back to his days as a volunteer in the 1960s on a kibbutz in the north. He noted, however, that a painful side of Israel's creation led to displacement of over

700,000 Palestinians who became refugees, adding that acknowledging this fact does not delegitimize Israel.

The Closing Gala Dinner

The closing [Gala Dinner on February 27](#) featured House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-California), Senator Tim Kaine (D-Virginia), and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

Senator Kaine stressed his strong support for the State of Israel and J Street and hailed the Iran deal. He noted his surprise over Trump's recent comments on "two states, one state—I like the one both parties like" and mentioned an exchange he had with David Friedman, Trump's nominee for Ambassador to Israel, during the latter's Senate confirmation hearing. Kaine believes the United States must support a two-state solution and never to support one state with no equality. This is why the role of J Street is very critical now, he said, and it must continue the fight for two states. Kaine also devoted time to the rise of anti-Semitism in America and the need to speak out against it, as anti-Semitism cannot go unchallenged. He also called on J Street to continue and be part of the fight against Islamophobia and against anti-refugee and anti-immigrant sentiments. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi urged delegates to join in the fight to "weed out" anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiments and praised J Street's activism around the country, including on many US campuses.

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was interviewed by *New York Times* journalist Roger Cohen. Albright expressed support for the Iran deal and the two-state solution and criticized President Trump for his approach and policies toward America's allies in Europe, for his fascination with Russian President Vladimir Putin, as well as for his stated intention to slash 30 percent of the State Department's budget. As an immigrant herself, arriving in the United States with her parents from Czechoslovakia after World War II, she described the entry-ban executive order, issued by Trump after one week in office, as a "crazy and dangerous" act that undermines American national security. She vowed to register as a Muslim if a Muslim registry is established in the United States.

Asked about the Atlantic Council's report (which she issued together with Stephen Hadley, focusing on the problems in the Middle East), Albright noted that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the reason for every problem in the region. Sectarian conflicts and the Iran-Saudi rivalry are problems that are far from resolution. Syria has turned into a killing ground and refugees are being "weaponized," used by Russia and Central European countries as a pretext to promote their political interests. Outside powers can help solve the problems of the region, she said, but it is first and foremost the responsibility of the countries in the region.

On the "outside-in" process to advance Israeli-Palestinian talks, Albright commented that nothing will happen without the political will of the parties themselves, but efforts in the past which started from outside players (for example, the 1991 Madrid peace conference and 2002 Arab Peace Initiative) were positive developments. She expressed some skepticism about the degree of influence the Sunni Arab states have over the Palestinians and indicated she has very slim expectations from Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. Still, Albright said she hoped something good would come of this idea.

Finally, she spoke of the “not normal” situation in the United States since Trump took over. Albright also raised concerns over political developments in Israel and what seems to her as scapegoating groups and organizations that are critical of the government. She remarked that Israeli values were always held in high regard, and she wants to be in a position to admire Israel’s values. The most worrying trend is the leaderships in the United States and Israel, both of which stir divisions within their own societies.

Panel Discussions

Panel discussions were held concurrently, often making it difficult to choose the most relevant discussion. Topics included building an effective alternative to the Israeli right, Jerusalem 2017, building bridges between the American Jewish and black communities, relations between American and Israeli Jewish communities, a new approach to the Middle East, the Iran deal, and what the Trump era means for Israel, the Palestinians, and the Middle East region featuring [MK Ayman Odeh](#). Many of the panel discussions can be viewed [here](#).

Final Comment

The conference received wide media coverage, mainly due to its juxtaposition with the anti-Semitic events unfolding across America, with notable speakers in the conference adding their voices to the conversation. Nevertheless, J Street clearly finds itself at a crossroads, and its relevance and ability to influence policy as a pro-Israel, left-of-center voice in Trump’s Washington are in question.