

The other Jewish lobby: J Street's Isaac Luria

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [November 3, 2009](#) issue

Just over a year old, J Street is a lobbying organization in Washington that describes itself as “pro-Israel, pro-peace.” It aims to offer an alternative perspective to that of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which for decades has been the dominant voice of American Jews on Mideast issues. The campaigns director for J Street is Isaac Luria, who joined J Street after several years of work in online organizing and consulting. A graduate of Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, Luria lived for a year in Jerusalem as a fellow of the Dorot Foundation.

Tell us about the origins of J Street.

For a long time progressive Jews and their allies have not had a strong political voice. A right-wing, hawkish voice has succeeded in dominating the conversation—a voice we don’t think is actually representative of American Jews, who make up one of the most progressive voting blocs in the country’s history.

What have you accomplished in your first year?

We developed an e-mail list of more than 100,000 people. Our independent political action committee raised over \$600,000 for congressional candidates who share our values.

What is the significance of new media for your work?

Three major progressive, Internet-driven campaigns have changed the political landscape: Howard Dean’s presidential campaign, the MoveOn organization and the 2008 presidential campaign. These efforts show what can happen with new media tactics—your message resonates, and people feel like they can make a difference through you. Without the new media, it would have taken years to build the kind of support we have.

Both J Street and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee claim to be pro-Israel. What does pro-Israel mean?

For a very long time, to be pro-Israel has meant that you have to sign on to whatever the Israeli government does. *Pro-Israel* often means using the term *anti-Israel* to slander all sorts of people who are doing good work—work that will make Israel more secure.

It is not “anti-Israel” to vigorously support a two-state solution. The only way forward is to build a Jewish democratic homeland. And everybody agrees on that, except for a few people on the far right and far left. A negotiated, diplomatic end to the conflict is in Israel’s best interest. There are many in Israel who believe that time is running out for a two-state solution. Ehud Olmert warned that without it, we could see the end of Israel as a Jewish democratic homeland.

What are your relations with moderate or liberal Christians?

We have worked formally and sometimes informally with Churches for Middle East Peace. I am not going to gloss over some of the problems that the pro-Israel community has had with progressive Christians: issues like divestment campaigns, which we oppose, and being honest about Palestinian obligations in negotiations. I don’t pretend that there is perfect alignment. But I think that these issues are worth talking and thinking through. It is only a matter of time until we find more ways to work together.

How does J Street view President Obama’s emphasis on ending the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza?

The settlement issue may be topping the headlines right now, but it certainly hasn’t been the only focus of the administration. It is also pressing the Palestinians to live up to their commitments to provide security in the West Bank and to stop terror and incitement against Israel. Sometimes that doesn’t get reported as part of the story. We are pleased that the settlement issue is something that President Obama has stayed strong on. Israel must live up to its agreements to halt settlement construction.

The settlement issue has been construed as an Israeli concession to the Palestinians or to the U.S. or to the international community. We reject that notion out of hand. Settlements in the West Bank threaten Israel’s security for demographic reasons. In

order to have a Jewish majority in the state of Israel, we must be realistic about stopping the settlement enterprise. Stopping it is best for Israel's long-term future as a Jewish democratic homeland.

How do you evaluate Obama's speech in Cairo?

I was excited by it. It confirmed what we had been sensing: that the president is very serious about a two-state solution. He is staking his personal credibility and political power on making it work. That's exactly what we've been missing. I also appreciated what he said about those who deny the Holocaust, which has been a huge problem in the Middle East. He also admitted that there are two peoples and two narratives about what has been happening over the past 60 years, and it is time for the bloodshed to end. That is a powerful thing for an American president to say.

What are J Street's main objectives for the coming year?

One is to continue to support President Obama in his efforts to create a two-state solution. There are going to be disagreements, especially as he pushes both sides to the table to hammer out hard compromises. The second thing we are doing is holding a major conference in Washington at the end of October. We are calling it a coming-out party for the pro-Israel, pro-peace movement.

Do you have any common ground with AIPAC?

We agree with AIPAC on lots of things and disagree with it on a few things. We agree that the foreign aid budget to Israel should remain where it is. We agree on a lasting U.S.-Israel relationship based on shared values and shared strategic interests. We would go one step further: that the mark of true friendship with Israel is to speak up when you feel that your friend is hurting itself. That's why we push for a two-state solution. That's why we push for strong U.S. leadership. That's why we are endorsing the president's call to freeze settlements.

What about the right of return for Palestinians?

The right of return is something that needs to be negotiated. J Street's position is that there is no way that having 3 million Palestinian refugees move back to Israel is a good idea. It does not preserve Israel's demographic Jewish majority—and we support a Jewish democratic Israel. There may be some room for a symbolic right of return, as former Israeli governments and Palestinian negotiators have come close

to saying, but we would never support something that would undermine Israel's security as a Jewish homeland.

What about the status of Jerusalem?

This is a very tough issue. We are in favor of a viable Palestinian state. Many experts on this issue believe that a viable Palestinian state would have to include a shared Jerusalem, but we will see.