

Muslim elected president of student wing of prominent pro-Israel group

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WASHINGTON, D.C. (RNS) A young Muslim woman has been elected as the head of the student arm of J Street, a liberal pro-Israel organization.

Amna Farooqi, 21, a Pakistani American and a senior at the University of Maryland, says she loves Israel, cares deeply about Palestinians, and sees nothing contradictory in a Muslim advocating for the Jewish state.

Growing up in a Muslim home in Potomac, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C., with a heavily Jewish population, Farooqi said she took on her family's sympathy for Palestinians under Israeli occupation in the West Bank. She also made many Jewish friends and grew comfortable in Jewish culture. She decided in college that she didn't understand the Israeli viewpoint on the Palestinian crisis and immersed herself in Israel study courses, including a semester at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Farooqi came to see Zionism, the idea that Israel is the homeland of the Jewish people, as a universally applicable story.

"I fell in love with Zionism because Zionism became about taking ownership over the story of one's people," she said in March. "It is about owning your future. How could I not respect that?"

Elected president of J Street U on Sunday (August 23), Farooqi is charged to advocate for Israel but takes the critical view of the Israeli occupation espoused by her group's parent organization, J Street. The Washington-based lobbying group is considered a liberal alternative to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the more established lobby that takes a more hard-line stance toward Palestinians.

During her one-year term, Farooqi said, she wants “to see American Jewish communal institutions become more active and transparent in supporting a two-state solution,” referring to the idea—widely supported by American Jews—that a Palestinian state should emerge alongside Israel. Farooqi said she is concerned that some groups that publicly support the two-state solution still invest in projects in Palestinian territories that compromise Palestinians’ rights.

American Jewish communal leaders have generally expressed support for Farooqi.

“We expect that she will lead J Street U in fulfilling its Zionist mission to be pro-Israel and pro-peace, as we would expect of any democratically elected president of J Street U,” said Jonah Pesner, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, the lobbying arm of the largest stream in American Judaism.