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*The emergence of JStreet: the impacts on American foreign policy and redefinition of Zionism*

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## *The emergence of JStreet: the impacts on American foreign policy and redefinition of Zionism*

In 2007, a study conducted by Cohen and Kelman, *Beyond Distancing: Young American Jews and their Alienation from Israel*, showed that the new generation of American Jews was less attached to Israel than the older one. Thus, the idea that American Jews were less concerned by Israel was emerging in public debate. Ties between the American Jewish community and Israel have always been very strong, and Israel has been backed by political and economic support from the United States (US), which explains the significant impact US have in shaping the Middle East (Ousset-Krief, 2012, 13 – 21). These ties rely on the activity of the Jewish lobbies, which is the topic of this essay. If the concrete support to Israel has been durably uncontested it is mainly thanks to the activities and pressure put by the AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee – for a long time the only official Jewish lobby, very close to the Israeli right-wing. Yet, since 2008, a change has occurred in the Jewish lobbying landscape: a new lobby – moderate, pacifist and critical against the Israeli right-wing government – was founded, JStreet. This lobby sees itself as the one which raises “the voices of the silent American Jewish majority [that] need to be heard”.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this essay is to evaluate the impact that this new lobby had on American foreign policy in the Middle East, and on the redefinition of Zionism and of the relation between Israel and the American Diaspora, and it will show that this impact has been weakened by many obstacles.

In order to prove this, it is necessary first to develop the Zionism JStreet is defending, and this by opposing it to AIPAC's. Then, I will analyse support and criticism vis-à-vis JStreet in order to evaluate its concrete impact on foreign policy and on the redefinition of Zionism and of the ties between Israel and the Diaspora.

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<sup>1</sup>Joe Klein, “Obama’s next foreign policy battle” in *Time Magazine*, 14/01/2013.

## From AIPAC to JStreet: two different Zionisms

### **An uncontested economic and political support to Israel: the work of AIPAC**

Since its foundation in 1951, AIPAC aims “to strengthen, protect and promote the U.S.-Israel relationship in ways that enhance the security of Israel and the United States”.<sup>2</sup> This security is achievable through the funding of Israel’s military capabilities, the insistence on Israel’s right of self-defense and of preventing aggressions, and the assertion of the convergence of US and Israel’s interests.

The strategy studied by AIPAC is to make sure to have a “bipartisan supporting Congress”<sup>3</sup>: they establish a close relationship with members of the Congress – the body that votes for resolutions and through which they can take effective actions and have a real impact – both Democrats and Republicans, to settle a continuity of the support of US to Israel. Their influence towards members of the Congress is known to be successful most of the times. For example, in 1973 during the Yom Kippur war, an episode in History where the partisans of the State of Israel feared the end of its existence, the AIPAC made the Congress sign on a resolution giving to Israel a financial aid of 2,2 billion dollars, which have certainly impacted on the outcome of this war. Moreover, its “Letter of 76”, signed by 76 senators, prevented the President Ford from reconsidering relations with Israel, maintaining thus the strong ties (Ousset-Krief, 2012, p. 79). These campaigns led by AIPAC explain in part the position held by the US in crucial moments of Middle Eastern history (such as their opposition to Palestinian statehood because considered as too dangerous for Israel security).

Yet, this intransigence of AIPAC on Israeli questions has sometimes been criticized by Israelis, because felt as an ingerence, as a will of imposing dependence from US – as Yitzkhak Rabin first said (Ousset-Krief, 2012, p. 80). Some Israeli citizens criticize these extremist resolutions taken by the AIPAC saying that American Jews do not experience Israeli reality, therefore cannot choose for them. It is in this context of criticism – combined that JStreet was founded.

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<sup>2</sup> AIPAC official website, “Our mission”  
<http://www.aipac.org/about/mission>

<sup>3</sup>ibidem

## **Considering the two-state solution as the key for Israel security: the creation of JStreet**

The name “JStreet” refers to the missing street in Washington D.C. The idea that JStreet’s president, Jeremy Ben-Ami, wanted to convey when founding this lobby in 2008, was that he wanted it to represent and to be the platform from which the moderated part of the American Jewish community, which he claims to be a majority, could express itself (Ben-Ami, 2011, p. 106, cited in Ousset-Krief, 2012, p. 105). This majority is not given a voice by the traditional Jewish establishment because the latter refuses the right to question and employs intimidating approaches with those who do not share its ideas (Ousset-Krief, 2012, pp. 105 – 112). Thus, Ben-Ami focuses on the idea that there should be a debate among the Jewish community concerning the ways to ensure security in Israel.

Ben-Ami also justifies this initiative by the apparent disattachment of young Americans from Israel. He explains this phenomenon by the disagreement of this generation with the harsh and violent actions led by the Israeli government, as for example Operation Cast Lead and the intensification of the settlements (Ousset-Krief, 2012, 13 – 21). Therefore, this new lobby also wants to reconnect the young generation with Zionism.

The means to achieve these goals according to JStreet is to push the US to encourage the peace-process, to support the two-state solution, and to have the courage as well to criticize the policies of Israeli governments when they cause instability in the Middle East. Their main aim is thus to shape a different American foreign policy in the Middle East, not only because it is a way to change the situation in the region, but also because it is in US interest to do it. Its strategy to change foreign policy is to influence Obama, more than the Congress, which is the bastion of AIPAC (Ousset-Krief, 2012, 105 – 112).

JStreet also focuses on its pronounced pro-Israeli feature, because for them being pro-Israelis means ensure peace and security to Israel, and not defending its government. What J Street is suggesting here is a new type of Zionism, not dependent from Israeli government, that is opposed to the traditional Zionism embodied by AIPAC, which blindly supports the government and refuses any type of compromise

with Palestinians or other Arab countries. Being Zionist means ensuring to the Israeli people and its future generation a secure and peaceful life, and if the only means to achieve this is guaranteeing a state to the Palestinians, then they will support this cause. It is very interesting to note that in JStreet's video presentation on their official website, the people interviewed are Israeli citizens calling for American Jews to support the two-state solution, because it is the way America can be helpful, as opposed to the AIPAC one where all of the contributors are American Jews who decide what is the best thing for Israelis.<sup>4</sup>

### Support and criticisms towards JStreet, an evaluation of its impacts

Have the aims of changing American foreign policy and redefining Zionism been reached? The analysis of praises and criticisms of JStreet activities can give the answer.

#### **Concerning their redefinition of Zionism**

The rise of JStreet addressed the question related to the Zionist affiliation and the ties between Israel and Jews of the diaspora. Being a Zionist does it necessarily mean to unquestionably support Israel, which wants itself as the representative of all the Jews in the world? Many scholars have supported JStreet claims, such as Professor Peter Beinart, explaining that young American Jews do not recognize themselves in the right-wing Zionism, simply because at the heart of the Jewish identity and ethics lays justice and peace, which are totally absent from the right-wing government's policies (2010). This is why they give to themselves the right to attack Israeli government and believe that helping Palestinians having their own state is also a way of being Zionist – if not the best. Thus, the definition of Zionism seems to take its independence from Israeli policies, and seems to create a break between Jews of the diaspora and the Israeli government, and JStreet activity is a significant marker of this change of relationship.

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<sup>4</sup>JStreet official website  
<http://jstreet.org>

On the other hand, this progressive Zionist feature of JStreet was denied and questioned by the rest of the American Jewish community and especially by Israel and its institutions. In fact, in reply for the foundation of JStreet, new institutions such as Z Street and the Emergency Committee for Israel were formed to restore the strong commitment to Israel and its government, underlining that being Zionist and pro-Israeli meant to support the government (Ousset-Krief, 2012,121). Moreover and most importantly, the Knesset organised in March 2011 a committee of enquiry to decide whether or not JStreet was Zionist. The committee decided that JStreet was not a Zionist lobby. Although it enjoyed support from some members of Kadima, the Knesset criticized the freedom that JStreet took in qualifying Israeli policies as non-democratic, and the open support to a Palestinian state that would threat the existence of the State of Israel (Ousset-Krief, 2012, 153 – 155). This exclusion of JStreet from Zionism shows that the Israeli State and its institutions still have a weight on defining Zionism, and thus that the impact of JStreet on redefining Zionism and changing the nature of the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora was not completely done.

### **Concerning their vision on American foreign policy in the Middle East**

One of the strengths of JStreet was the relationship it established with Obama as soon as he was elected. In fact, Obama had a particular interest in that lobby because he knew it could help him realise his agenda, which was to speed the peace process (Ousset-Krief, 2012, p. 111). This is explicit when looking at the invitation of JStreet to the White House, and at representatives of Obama administration attending JStreet's first national convention in October 2009 (Ousset-Krief, 2012, pp. 106, 111). This close relationship with Obama undoubtedly helped JStreet growing in visibility, and giving it more power to influence foreign policy in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, having influence on the President is not enough to determine the direction of foreign policy. The Congress has a significant role in this matter, and as long as the influence of AIPAC in the Congress is strong, it will be hard for JStreet to have a meaningful impact on determining foreign policy in the Middle East. The resolution HR 1734 was voted in 2010 by a large majority of the Congress and it expressed its opposition to the proclamation of a State for Palestinians, showing the

“victory” of AIPAC against JStreet and the difficulty JStreet has in changing the foreign policy agenda.

Moreover, the obstacles JStreet has in impacting on American foreign policy result also from a change in Obama’s discourse since 2011. This change of discourse – a softening towards Israeli government and a critique of Abbas’s unilateral initiative – could be explained by the evolution of Obama’s probability to be reelected, as shown by some polls. The one conducted by McLaughlin and Associates showed that only 38% of the American Jews would vote for him again as opposed to the 78% of Jews that elected him. The reason of this evolution is that until that time, Obama’s agenda was perceived as unfavorable to Israel, especially with “The New Beginning” speech (Cairo 2009), which displeased the Jewish community (Ousset-Krief, 2012, pp. 135-136).

It is also important to note that JStreet suffers from a loss of credibility due to deviances that seem to occur inside the lobby. Those who attack JStreet say that the problem with criticism of right-wing Zionism has given the possibility to anti-Zionist personalities to speak from this platform. The journalist Michael Goldfarb has accused the lobby of supporting and being supported by terrorists (Alterman, 2011). This impression that JStreet is conveying does not allow them to make consensus in the Jewish community, and to be taken into consideration when voting for resolutions. Hence, determining foreign policy agenda becomes impossible.

In conclusion, in a context where the policies of the right-wing Israeli government, supported by AIPAC, were perceived as excessive by a moderated part of the American Jewish community, JStreet came to life to suggest a new and progressive definition of Zionism, combining Israel security and criticisms towards Israeli government. It also hoped to change American foreign policy in the Middle East in order to promote the two-state solution. Yet, the strength of AIPAC, despite numerous criticisms against its extreme positions and means of action (Alterman, 2009), on the one side, and the accusations vis-à-vis JStreet of anti-Zionism on the other side, have prevented JStreet from having a significant impact on the foreign policy agenda and in redefining Zionism. However, these obstacles can be overpassed, giving to JStreet the chance to affirm its positions.

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