

# J Street Parley Attracting Big Names, but Will Israel's Ambassador Attend?

By Ron Kampeas

WASHINGTON (JTA) - J Street has lined up plenty of high-profile speakers for its first major conference. But the new and controversial self-described "pro-Israel, pro-peace" lobby is looking to add one more prominent name to the guest list.

The organization - which has backed U.S. pressure on Israel (and the Palestinians), criticized Israel's invasion of Gaza and criticized more established pro-Israel groups - wants Michael Oren, the U.S.-born and raised Israeli ambassador to Washington, to attend and address its first major conference at the end of this month.

Oren is undecided. "A decision about his participation or the embassy's participation will be taken soon." Jonathan Peled, his spokesman, told JTA. "We will have to deliberate this week."

Peled said that what he told The Jerusalem Post last week still stands:

Some of J Street's positions "impair" Israel's interests. He would not elaborate further, except to say that this has been conveyed to J Street officials in private conversations.

Jeremy Ben-Ami, J Street's founder and executive director, is not taking no for an answer. "Your attendance - even to clarify some of our areas of disagreement - will be respectfully welcomed, and we promise you an open hearing as we hope and expect you will welcome us at the Embassy one day to present our views and opinions in that same spirit," Ben-Ami wrote in an open letter released this week. J Street sent its original, private, invitation to Oren on July 13.

Oren's presence would lend an official Israeli imprimatur at a time when J Street's harshest critics are painting the group as undermining Jewish unity and working in tandem with Israel's enemies. Most recently, some critics have played up the fact that a handful of J Street's donors - out of thousands - have ties with Arab countries and Iranian expatriates opposed to sanctions against Tehran.

Such efforts to delegitimize the organization appear to have failed. J Street's upcoming conference has been endorsed

by 160 congressional lawmakers. The slate of scheduled speakers includes several former top Israeli officials. In addition, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, who leads the country's largest synagogue movement, the Union for Reform Judaism, is co-chairing

the conference's main event, a town hall meeting on Israel's relationship with U.S. Jews. U.S. Reps. Robert Wexler (D-Fla.) and Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), leaders in Congress' unofficial Jewish caucus and close to Obama, are taking part in a panel that examines how to

expand the definition of "pro-Israel" on the Hill.

Most notable, perhaps, is the participation of Yoffie, who tussled earlier this year with J Street over its equivocation over naming Hamas as the villain in Israel's Gaza war. He told JTA that J Street's views

deserve a hearing in the wider Jewish community, and praised it for doing more than many more established groups to promote the Israeli position of a two-state solution. Yoffie said he would not refrain from criticizing some of J Street's

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