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What Kind of a Birthday Present is That?

J Street Calls on Presidential Candidates to Offer Israel the Gift of Realistic Peace and Security on 60th Birthday

WASHINGTON—“What kind of a birthday gift is that?” J Street asks President George Bush, referring to his failure to push aggressively for a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by the end of the year.

The question is the premise of J Street’s first major netroots campaign, as the President prepares to travel to Israel next week to celebrate the country’s 60th anniversary. J Street’s campaign follows its launch last month as the first PAC with a corresponding lobby to give pro-peace, pro-Israel Americans a voice in American politics and in the policy process.

“It’s Israel’s 60th and President Bush is going to her party empty-handed, just as he did on her 53rd, 54th, 55th and so on,” said Jeremy Ben-Ami, J Street’s executive director. “What kind of friend is that?”

While President Bush’s neglect of the conflict serves as the campaign’s cautionary tale, J Street is looking beyond the end of his term to influence the three presidential candidates, one of whom will be in a position to chart a new course for America in the Middle East. Through hundreds of thousands of emails, the group is urging concerned Americans to contact Senators John McCain, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama to make it clear “that meaningless platitudes and weak leadership won’t cut it anymore to make you ‘Israel’s best friend.’”

“The last seven years have made it abundantly clear that American politicians who stake out the most hawkish, right-wing positions on Israel have served neither Israel’s nor the United States’ best interest, as both countries have become less safe as a result of the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” said Ben-Ami.

With the window of opportunity narrowing for achieving a realistic and viable two-state solution by the day, thousands of Americans will call on the candidates to include in their own birthday message to Israel the pledge that as President they will make a peace agreement a top priority “starting in Year 1, not Year 7 or 8.” Among the other demands the email makes are the appointment of a dedicated envoy to ensure compliance and the pursuit of tough diplomacy with as broad a range of actors as necessary, including the Syrians, to achieve sustainable peace and security.

“The most pro-Israel present United States can offer is strong leadership to establish permanent, agreed-upon and secure borders and a path to peace and security for the whole Middle East,” added Ben-Ami.

J Street’s ground-breaking effort adds a political dimension to existing advocacy to change the direction of American policy in the Middle East and will help to broaden the public and policy debate in the United States. Through its PAC, J Street will endorse and raise funds for several congressional and senatorial candidates in the 2008 election cycle. J Street itself will undertake innovative netroots campaigns to cultivate a large online list of Americans to demonstrate the breadth of support for its pro-Israel, pro-peace agenda.

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