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Israel can't afford to reject J Street

By Yehuda Ben Meir

The Israeli government's policy toward the Jewish American organization J Street is mistaken, foolish, harmful and irresponsible. The idiocy of Israel boycotting a Jewish lobby group that enjoys not inconsiderable support both within American Jewry and in the U.S. administration and Congress - just because its positions don't accord with those of the government here - is unprecedented and reveals a state of total confusion.

Apparently this is yet another deplorable result of the disproportionate influence that the far right, here and in the United States, has over Benjamin Netanyahu. It is hard to believe that the prime minister, who is well aware of American and international realities, does not realize that this is an unmatched act of folly.

It's no secret that among U.S. Jews, as among Israeli Jews, there is a wide range of views and attitudes on all current political issues. And it's no secret that among the young generation of American Jews, new winds are blowing. Indeed, perhaps there is even a chilly draft when it comes to questions of their values and morality, and of how these affect their relationship with Israel.

Frankly, I find some of J Street's positions unacceptable, and some of the so-called new winds also infuriate me, as they certainly do many other Israelis. But the response should not be boycotting and casting aspersions on these people, rather to conduct an ongoing dialogue with them and to make persistent attempts to explain the government's policies and to convince the group of their correctness. It would be an act of outrageous irresponsibility to alienate these Jews instead of doing everything possible to bring them closer, even while engaging them in sharp debate and arguing in favor of Israel's just positions.

J Street defines itself as a pro-Israel organization, emphasizes that Israel is the state of the Jewish nation and fully supports the American commitment to its security and well-being. This is not Neturei Karta or the extreme left-wing Matzpen, but the elite of American Jewry.

Is it conceivable that the Israeli ambassador in Washington turned down their invitation to address its members? I believe that even if the

Islamic lobby in the United States were to invite the ambassador, he should accept and proudly represent Israel's policies before its members. And this is doubly true for a Jewish lobby, and it is the way that all Israeli governments, left and right, have behaved in the past.

One offense leads to another, and one act of folly leads to an even greater one. What began as a senseless step by the ambassador was ratcheted up a notch in Jerusalem last week, when government officials set insulting conditions for a meeting with congressmen who came to Israel as part of a J Street delegation. These people are supporters of Israel, and they did not hide the fact that they were deeply offended. This is hardly the way to advance Israel's cause.

We are in the midst of an unparalleled diplomatic struggle. Our enemies and those who wish us ill are conducting a persistent worldwide campaign aimed at delegitimizing the State of Israel, particularly in Europe and on U.S. college campuses. This is a matter of vital importance: A sober, responsible government would do everything possible to embrace each and every group belonging to that large community - not estrange them.

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