

30/7/04 USA American Jews divided

William

W. P. Post

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They all favour the policies of Ariel Sharon. They all welcome 'the wall'. They all support the proposed Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. They all believe that settlements in the West Bank and Gaza are God-given rights.

And they all charge that all Arabs want to drive Israel into the sea.

Neither in the US nor in Israel do the facts on the ground support these conclusions. In Israel, Left-leaning and Right-leaning political parties and media have been locked in fierce debate for many years.

The same deeply felt differences are mirrored in the United States. What is true in the US is that dissenters from American 'conventional wisdom' on Israel do not get anything like the financial support, press coverage or attention from office-seeking politicians afforded to more powerful and well-connected groups such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

As Esther Kaplan wrote recently in her article 'The Jewish Divide on Israel' in the Nation magazine: "AIPAC and the Conference of Presidents (of Major Jewish Organizations), along with their powerful fellow travellers, Christian Zionists, have forged a bipartisan consensus in Washington that Middle East policy must privilege the 'special relationship' between the United States and Israel.

In practice, this solid consensus means putting Israeli security before peace; supporting even such extreme Israeli measures as the separation wall and assassinations; and delegitimizing the Palestinian leadership."

Yet there is much evidence that groups representing alternative views are growing in both numbers and in influence.

Palestinian human rights.

The Oakland-based Jewish Voice for Peace, was founded in 1996, when, "despite three years of participating in a 'peace process' under the Oslo accords, Palestinians and Israelis seemed increasingly unlikely to achieve the peace they claimed to seek."

JVP members were especially concerned that the Israeli government was continuing to build settlements in the Occupied West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem.

It organized more than 100 people to protest at the Israeli consulate in San Francisco, becoming one of the first US Jewish groups to criticize Israeli treatment of Palestinians.

Jews Against the Occupation, an organization in the New York City area, rejects the notion that it is "necessary" to subjugate Palestinians for the sake of keeping Jews safe; claims that that security can only come from mutual respect, and that the occupation of Palestine is only worsening the position of Jews in the Middle East and around the world; opposes the demolition of Palestinian houses and crops in the Occupied Territories; calls for an end to US government aid to Israel; and opposes the Israeli government's "attack the Palestinian economy."

Meretz USA, an affiliate of Israel's left-wing Meretz Party, calls itself "a progressive Zionist organization that educates Americans about issues of civil rights and peace in Israel."

It sees "no alternative to renewing the search for peace between Israel and the Palestinian people, establishing and sustaining a cease-fire, and taking basic measures conducive to the renewal of meaningful negotiations leading to the creation of a sovereign, demilitarized Palestinian state."

The organization has consistently opposed building Jewish settlements in the occupied territories.

These are but a few of the so-called non-mainstream organi-

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that 50 to 60 percent of American Jews favor ending the occupation and dismantling settlements in return for peace.

While there is little likelihood that this growth will be very visible in an election year - Israel is the 'third rail' of American politics - expect these voices to be get a lot more attention after November.

Who are these groups and what are their views?

One of them is the Chicago-based Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, (the Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace), co-founded in 2002 by Marcia Freedman, a former Knesset member. Brit Tzedek is a national grass roots membership organization representing 16,000 members with chapters in 21 cities.

It supports a negotiated settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based roughly on the 1967 borders, sharing Jerusalem, and evacuation of settlements.

It asserts that security for Israel can only be achieved through the establishment of an economically and politically viable Palestinian state, an end to Israel's occupation of land acquired during the 1967 war, and to Palestinian terrorism.

Another group is the Berkeley-based Tikkun Community. It calls on the Palestinian people to acknowledge the right of Jews to maintain their own homeland in the pre-1967 borders of the state of Israel, with Jewish control over the Jewish section of Jerusalem and the Western Wall. It calls on the Palestinian people to stop acts of terror against Israel and opposes Israel's violations of

es for active White House and State Department engagement in the peace process, especially administration efforts to broker a new interim understanding between Israelis and Palestinians, facilitate final status arrangements that reconcile Israeli security with Palestinian statehood, and encourage negotiations between Israel, Syria, and Lebanon.

What are these groups doing to make their views heard?

There is a long menu of initiatives. For example, in March, one of the older peace groups, Rabbis for Human Rights of North America, sent an open letter to Sharon protesting Israel's house-demolition policy, which was signed by 400 rabbis, including leaders of some of the largest congregations in the country.

In April, Brit Tzedek organized 10,000 US Jews to sign another open letter calling on Israel and the US to fund the relocation of Jewish settlers from the occupied territories to Israel.

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But there is diversity of opinion even among these groups.

About the only thing they all agree on is Israel's right to exist. On every other issue, as Esther Kaplan notes, "American Jews are as polarized on Israel as Americans as a whole are polarized about George W. Bush."

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