

# American Jews and the *intifada*

by Mark Bruzonsky

For some years now a small but at times vocal minority of American Jews have talked about "mutual recognition", "Palestinian rights" and sometimes even the "two-state solution", including negotiations with the PLO. More recently a number of American Jews, organised around such groups as New Jewish Agenda and the American-Israeli Council for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, have started lobbying for the convening of an international peace conference that would bring together the Israeli government and the PLO at the negotiating table.

And yet, despite the concern and dismay being expressed by liberal and progressive segments of American Jewry, there have been certain sacred cows, certain tests of allegiance, certain matters of faith, which have greatly constrained American Jews from speaking out about some of the most basic issues in US-Israeli relations. Indeed, it has at times appeared that the Israelis and their supportive "leaders" of the American Jewish community have been willing to pay the price of having a little public dissension (nothing approaching, of course, what goes on in Israel) so long as the litmus test issues - American financial aid and the American-Israeli alliance - have remained sacrosanct.

The *intifada* has finally changed this situation. Galvanised into action by the Palestinian uprising, a group of independent American Jews, many of whom at one time or another have been involved with some of the important American Jewish organisations, decided that the time had finally come to speak out without

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the usual inhibitions. They have done so through a series of unusual advertisements in the well-known leftist weekly *The Nation*, the influential *New York Review of Books*, and the daily *Christian Science Monitor*. At first this was an *ad hoc* effort. But when it became apparent that there was considerable support for the initial "statement", first published on 13 February, the group decided to found the Jewish Committee on the Middle East (JCOME) and to provide a serious alternative voice from within the American Jewish community.

JCOME took a major step in this direction when it testified on 26 April before the Congressional Black Caucus "Hearing" on the uprising — an "unofficial" Congressional investigation since

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the CBC is not an officially constituted committee of the Congress, but nevertheless an event which was broadcast to millions on C-Span television and which will reach many others when the "Hearing" record is finally published in a few weeks.

What distinguishes JCOME from all other American Jewish groups is the willingness and ability of its leadership to address the key issues of money and allegiance. The JCOME "Statement", entitled *Time to Dissociate from Israeli Policies*, specifically calls for "a complete re-evaluation of what has become since 1967 the American sponsorship of Israel," including cutting back economic aid "to much smaller levels" and "radically reduced ... military and intelligence assistance". Furthermore, by calling for a dissociation from Israeli policies JCOME's position is actually an effort by influential American Jews to divorce the US from the Jewish State, in other words to "normalise" the US-Israeli relationship.

In articles and press interviews representatives of JCOME have clearly noted that they feel it is the sovereign right and responsibility of Israel's citizens to "choose their own country's destiny, but at the very least the citizens of the United States should stop financing and supporting policies that are contrary to the principles and values we hold precious as Americans and Jews".

In addition to publishing their "Statement" and testifying before Congress, JCOME has also issued a public challenge to the leaders of the American Jewish community. In an advertisement which was highlighted with pictures of Tom Dine, head of the Jewish-Israeli lobby on Capitol Hill, and Morris Abrams, president of the President's Conference of Major American Jewish Organisations, JCOME published an open letter challenging these two groups to join them in commissioning a public opinion poll to ascertain what American Jews really think about Israel's policies and the huge amounts of American aid now being provided to Israel at the rate of approximately \$10m a day.

In this open letter to Messrs. Abram and Dine the JCOME executive committee noted that according to a *Los Angeles Times* poll in April, 29 per cent of American Jews favour negotiations with the PLO, 56 per cent did not contribute anything to Israel last year, and nearly 66 per cent do not belong to any of the organisations that comprise what is euphemistically known as "the organised American Jewish community". Also, according to a *Gallup* poll in March, 46 per cent of college-educated Americans favour the creation of a Palestinian state and 41 per cent favour cutting off or reducing aid to Israel.

In his testimony to the Congressional committee, human rights expert Henry Schwarzschild noted that "American Jewish organisations ... have made it difficult for the American people and the Congress to hear and understand the depth of anguish felt by many American Jews regarding Israeli behaviour".

The JCOME "Statement" has been endorsed in recent months by over 500 American Jews including professors at 73 universities throughout the US.

*JCOME's executive committee:*

*Professor Yigal Arens, University of Southern California; Professor Joel Beinin, Stanford University; Mark Bruzonsky, Washington DC; Professor Susan Einbinder, Colgate University; Professor Herbert H. Hill, University of Wisconsin; Professor Zachary Lockman, Harvard University; Professor Seymour Melman, Columbia University; Rabbi Michael Robinson, New York; Henry Schwarzschild, Washington University, St Louis; Richard Waldon, attorney in Los Angeles*

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