

Is Europe's new Jewish group putting unfair pressure on Israel?

JCall co-founder David Chemla says some pressure is actually helping Israel's image in Europe.

By Danna Harman

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A computer analyst and writer who was born in Tunisia, David Chemla lived in Israel for 10 years, served in the Israel Defense Forces and today resides in Paris, where he serves as chair of Peace Now France. He spoke to Haaretz on his way to Brussels, where he was headed to present JCall's "European Jewish Call for Reason" petition to the European Parliament today.

JCall is an initiative of public figures and intellectuals, such as Bernard-Henri Levy, Alain Finkielkraut and Daniel Cohn-Bendit, which seeks to make a new Jewish European voice heard on Israel-related issues. The petition being presented in Brussels underscores Israel's right to exist "as a Jewish and democratic state," but also criticizes Israeli policies - such as the continued settlement policy in the West Bank - and calls for a "viable and sovereign Palestinian state" alongside Israel. JCall has collected more than 3,000 signatures online.

Considering the animosity in Europe today toward Israel's policies, and even toward Israel in general, how is this initiative helpful? Don't you think putting more pressure on a beleaguered Israel at this time is irresponsible?

I think our initiative is actually helping Israel's image in Europe. It is a pretty low image over here these days, because of what happened in Gaza, mainly, and it is commonly believed in Europe that Israel is the provocative, negative side of the conflict - the one that is blocking the peace process.

What we are doing is showing that within the Jewish community there is debate - an open debate - and that we are not monolithic. We identify ourselves with Israel and its rights, but we criticize. This is healthy and needed. We are Jews, Zionists and are always ready to stand up for Israel's right to exist. We are against delegitimization and boycotts of Israel, but what we are showing is that it's okay to be identified with Israel, and at the same time also to criticize [some] of it's actions.

As for [being] responsible, we are doing the only responsible thing we can think to do. We are speaking as friends of Israel and we are saying "You are going to make a mistake. You have to decide how to behave, not us. But as friends, as Jews, we want to tell you that you are going down a wrong path."

In Israel, it seems there are plenty of people living with their heads in the sand. The economic and the security situations are fine, so there is this idea that there is no hurry, that there is time to resolve this crisis - but there is not. We don't think time is on Israel's [side]. We are worried that a two-state solution is slipping through our fingers.

How did JCall come about? Whose idea was it?

The initiative was started by a small group of Jews, members of all sorts of Jewish bodies around Europe. I am part of Peace Now in France, for example. In Switzerland and Italy, there is a group called the Martin Buber circle whose members were active, and so on.

A few months ago, we got together in Paris from all over Europe - about 20 people - and we spoke about the situation and talked about doing this. We agreed to several principles: First of all, we are all Zionists. Second, we are against the government actions on settlements. And third, we are against delegitimization and boycotts [of Israel]. We came together and started working on this petition.

Did you model yourself on J Street in the United States? And what does this say about changes taking place in the Diaspora vis-a-vis Israel today?

Of course we have followed J Street and what they have been doing. We know some of them - but they are Americans, they don't want to start doing politics in Europe. So we have no organizational connection to J Street, but we know about each other and we are interested in seeing what's going on in each other's work. It is hard to say what might happen later, and whether we might cooperate, but for now we [J Call] are just focused on launching our own organization.

In Europe, it is hard to compare Jewish communities, as each has its own story. But I can best analyze the French community and what is changing there.

The French community is often considered to be on the right side of the political spectrum, mainly because of the positions of the Conseil Représentatif des Institutions juives de France (CRIF) which is the official Jewish organization representing the community. We recognize the CRIF of course and have no discussion about the fact that they are the official voice. But as many as 70 to 80 percent of Jews in France don't even belong to any sort of organization - not the CRIF or any other - and therefore do not feel their voices are represented.

How have the traditional Jewish community leaders responded? I see there is already a counter-movement to JCall starting up, called "Keep Your Reason." A co-sponsor of that movement, the Algerian-born French scholar Shmuel Trigano, calls your initiative "totally outdated" and says it gives "the feeling that Israel is the sole obstacle to peace."

Well, it's healthy to have a debate. I am happy to have it out with them, privately or publicly. We are not brothers who have to

agree on everything. We are equal citizens and everyone can speak for themselves.

And of course, we are getting attacked from both sides. Trigano is moderate relative to some of the reactions we have gotten from the right.

We have been receiving e-mails saying we are traitors and that those opposed to what we have to say will also come to Brussels and disrupt our activities. But I don't think they can get into parliament, because there will be police there.

On the other side, the left, pro-Palestinian groups are also attacking us, saying our text is very Zionist and that we do not address the Palestinians directly - rather that we are just repackaging the same old Israeli Zionist claims. In a way they are right, we have not invented America and to them I say, we have not come to address everything. We are Jews and we are Zionists and we are focused in a new way on some aspects of the problem.

How much support do you currently have? And how do you intend to keep your momentum going?

More than 3,000 people have signed the petition and every day more people are signing on. In Brussels, there is only room for 400 people in the auditorium for our meeting and all the places are already taken. People are coming in from Germany, Italy, Switzerland, France.

What about the British? Where are they?

The British are partners to the idea, and there are some prominent Brits who have signed on, but [in terms of] Jewish institutions there, they are not yet partnering in full with the initiative.

Anyway, after the meetings today in Brussels we will continue to strengthen and expand to other countries. We will meet and keep in touch. The idea is to meet up every few months in a different European country. The next meeting will probably be in France, maybe after the summer and the [Jewish] holidays, when we are a little stronger and better organized. Our plan is to slowly slowly expand, continue explaining ourselves and engage with those who want to criticize.

What do you ultimately hope to accomplish with this initiative? Where do you see yourselves in a year?

I can't answer that as I don't have a crystal ball, but I am convinced that there is a need for this initiative in Europe. The responses we have received so far show that there are many many people - Jews - who are thankful for us for bringing their voice out. People are tired of not having any hope.

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