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## Pitching peace as well as Israel

By [Ron Kampeas](#) · September 28, 2010

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Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and The Israel Project president Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi at a dinner in New York hosted by Mizrahi's group, Sept. 21, 2010. (David Neff)

WASHINGTON (JTA) -- Two months ago the Israel Project was wondering, in a Capitol Hill briefing, "Is the Palestinian Authority preparing its people for peace?"

The answer was a pretty unequivocal "no."

Delivering the briefing was Itamar Marcus, a founder of Palestinian Media Watch who in his writings has posited that anti-Semitism is not just endemic to Palestinian nationalism but central to it.

Last week, the same Israel Project said it was "honored" to host a dinner for Jewish groups in New York with Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad -- and was even more willing to be charmed by him.

"Prime Minister Fayyad's spirit of hope was extremely welcome," said Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, the founder and president of The Israel Project. "We know that some people will criticize us for falling for a Palestinian 'charm

offensive.' However, there is nothing offensive about charm. More Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians, should sit together over dinner and exchange ideas -- especially when it can help lead to security and peace."

Contradiction?

Not at all, Mizrahi told JTA in an interview: Both events stem from The Israel Project's mandate to accurately represent Israel's policies. In this case, Mizrahi said, she got her hechsher for Fayyad from Benjamin Netanyahu.

"The prime minister of Israel said that this is his partner for peace," Mizrahi said. "If the supposedly right-wing prime minister of Israel says this is partner for peace, it is."

Insiders say that The Israel Project's recent aggressive outreach -- to Palestinians in particular and Arabs and Muslims generally -- is a signal of Netanyahu's seriousness in his direct talks with Palestinian leaders, which were renewed recently at the behest of the Obama administration. Netanyahu is giving a green light to American pro-Israel groups to take the talks seriously.

"You've got to welcome anyone who reaches out," said Hadar Susskind, director of policy for J Street, the self-described pro-peace, pro-Israel organization, which was not present at the meeting. "It can only help for people to understand each other and for all parties to end the conflict."

Past peace negotiations have been hindered to a degree by vigorous opposition by some American Jewish groups. In 1995, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee played a critical role in getting a U.S. law passed that recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital over the private objections of then-President Clinton and then-Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who did not want the issue hampering negotiations.

Mizrahi, 46, was an heir to a cosmetics dynasty who entered the political sphere through Democratic politics -- she had an unsuccessful run for Congress in her home state of North Carolina. She founded and ran a strategic

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communications company that had among its clients the Clinton White House and a number of foreign leaders.

She cuts a figure that is at once imposing and disarming: Mizrahi is tall, and always impeccably and brightly dressed, but exudes deference and charm as soon as she enters a room, remembering every face and details about her interlocutors.

She was among three women who co-founded the Israel Project in 2002, appalled by the image battering Israel was taking during the second intifada. Their strategy was to help make Israel's case through friendly outreach and assistance to the media.

The Israel Project has expanded to a team of 44 and two offices in Washington and Jerusalem. Its annual budget has surpassed \$7 million.

Mizrahi, as president, occasionally has been caught in the trap of not testing ideas that may seem normative in Israel but sound a jarring note in the wider world. For instance last year, an internal document suggested referring to the removal of settlements as "ethnic cleansing." She had the reference removed.

Hussein Ibish, a senior fellow at the American Task Force on Palestine, which helped arrange the recent evening with Fayyad, said his organization sees engaging with the mainstream of the American Jewish community as critical to making negotiations work.

"We have to have the best possible relations with the widest swath of Jewish American groups," Ibish said. "We want to talk with any organization that is interested in a two-state solution."

The American Task Force on Palestine also dialogues with AIPAC and the American Jewish Committee, he said.

Ibish, however, questioned The Israel Project's ties with Marcus and other figures who over the years have depicted the whole of Islam as implacably radical.

Mizrahi said her relationship with Marcus and Palestinian Media Watch, which tracks Palestinian incitement and has been criticized by left-wing groups for ignoring a diminishment of that incitement in recent years, was tactical and not ideological. Exposing and tamping down incitement create the conditions for peace, she said.

"When you end the incitement, you can create space for Palestinian leaders to say 'yes,' " said Mizrahi, recalling talking to a U.S. negotiator during the 1990s who said that Yasser Arafat never fully embraced peacemaking because he feared for his life.

"I believe that work is incredibly good for both sides, whatever its motivation," Mizrahi said of Palestinian Media Watch.

That thinking also was behind a new initiative to replicate The Israel Project's success with U.S. and European media by providing information for the Arab and Muslim media. A staff of four has cultivated relations with 2,000 Arab reporters in the region, Mizrahi said.

U.S. Rep. Brad Sherman (D-Calif.), a board member of Mizrahi's organization, said it was a natural next step.

"If you had to pick an area where we had to get the pro-peace-with-Israel message out, it's in the Arabic language," he told JTA.

After polling by The Israel Project showed increased support for a two-state solution in the Palestinian areas but steadfast opposition in Arab countries, Mizrahi said she saw an opening for outreach to Arab media.

The Israel Project emphasizes positive outreach and offers of assistance to media rather than the blandishments and chastisements that characterize many pro-Israel groups.

"We're booking and doing interviews on Al Jazeera," Mizrahi said, sounding slightly amazed at it herself.

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