Christian Zionism and its Religious Influence in American Politics

Patrick Q. Mason and Khadiga Omar

One of the distinctive elements of the United States’ foreign policy is its close alliance with Israel. Numerous reasons can be given for this warm relationship: Israel’s political and economic orientation toward the West; America’s desire to maintain a strategic partner in the Middle East; the democratic politics of both nations; the residual effects of post-Holocaust guilt in the West; and the disproportionate lobbying weight of the American Jewish community, to name a few. An additional factor that helps explain the strength of the bond between the United States and Israel is the influence of an often ignored or misunderstood movement called Christian Zionism. Christian Zionists have enjoyed easy access to the halls of power in recent years because of the importance of religious conservatives to the Republican base, as well as the personal evangelical Christian faith of former president George W. Bush. From this platform Christian Zionism has exerted significant influence on American policy toward Israel and the Middle East more broadly. Even with the relative decline of conservative power and the ascendance of President Barack Obama and the Democratic Party, Christian Zionism remains a potent force that will affect the policy decisions of the new administration.

Understanding Christian Zionism

Christian Zionism is the belief among some Christians that the return of Jews to Israel is a providential fulfillment of biblical prophecy and represents a necessary step toward the Second Coming of Jesus. Christian Zionists consider Jews to have a special place in God’s redemptive plan as His covenant people. They frequently quote the promise made by God to Abraham: “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3). Christian Zionists believe this verse applies today just as it did in ancient times and provides a heavenly mandate for God-fearing people to “bless” Israel or risk divine disfavor. Their interpretation of numerous biblical passages predicting the restoration of Israel leads them to believe that the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was, in the words of prominent televangelist and political conservative Pat Robertson, “ordained by God.”(1) Israel’s expansion as a result of successive wars and territorial occupations is similarly interpreted as another step in the divine plan to restore God’s people to the land of their inheritance.

Not all Christians are Christian Zionists; indeed, as the movement has gained strength and prominence in recent years, a chorus of denunciations has swelled from diverse corners of the Christian world.(2) Despite its critics, Christian Zionism cuts across denominational lines and is especially strong in conservative evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant churches that believe in biblical infallibility. Particularly in its contemporary form, Christian Zionism draws heavily on a theological
system called premillennial dispensationalism. This particular brand of theology places special emphasis on the immanent end of the world and final battle between good and evil. In recent decades the dispensationalist view of history and theology became widely popularized in the United States through the publication of bestselling books such as Hal Lindsey’s The Late, Great Planet Earth and Tim LaHaye’s Left Behind series. Israel and the Jewish people play crucial roles in dispensationalist theology; indeed, the return of Christ and ultimate triumph of righteousness is dependent on fulfillment of prophecies concerning the restoration of Jews to the land of Israel. Christian Zionists thus believe they have a major stake in the maintenance and success of Israel. Indeed, it is fair to say that in dispensationalism, Israel is the center around which everything revolves.

**Christian Zionism and American Nationalism**

Although Christian Zionism is primarily concerned with the welfare of Jews in Israel, it resonates with a religious sense of American nationalism. According to this view, God ordained the founding of the United States and declared America a chosen land with a special mission in world history. Christian Zionists envision America and Israel in a divinely blessed tandem relationship that will ultimately prove redemptive for all humankind. If God blesses those who bless Israel, as Genesis pronounces, then America’s unflinching support for Israel can only bring heavenly favor and prosperity to both nations.

The ideals of Christian Zionism influenced a number of twentieth-century U.S. presidents to various degrees, which in turn shaped America’s historic relationship with Jews and with Israel. For instance, Woodrow Wilson said he adopted the 1917 Balfour Declaration in part because he believed it his duty to “help restore the Holy Land to its people.” Similarly, upon the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Harry S Truman referred to himself as “Cyrus,” the Persian king who granted ancient Israel the right to return to their land after years of captivity.(3)

The contemporary relationship of Christian Zionism to American nationalism was highlighted in July 2007 when Senator Joe Lieberman, the most prominent Jew in American national politics, spoke at the annual conference of a leading Christian Zionist organization. Lieberman assumed the mantle of a Hebrew prophet or high priest, showering blessings on the group and its founder. He emphasized the fundamental similarities between Israel and the United States and proclaimed that the most patriotic and righteous thing the assembled crowd could do, as both Christians and Americans, was to give Israel their hearts, their money, and their political clout.(4)

**Contemporary Christian Zionism**

Christian Zionism is a broad-based movement with a number of different institutional homes.(5) Sincerely religious and deeply political in nature, most Christian Zionist groups lobby the U.S. government to maintain and even strengthen its Israel-friendly policies. Many also feature social activism on behalf of Jews (in Israel and abroad), as well as educational outreaches to spread their message. Some sponsor major events for interested Christians, such as an annual Feast of Tabernacles celebration in Israel that includes visits to Jewish settlements in occupied territories, worship services atop the Temple Mount, and a show of solidarity with IDF soldiers.(6)

A profile of one of the most prominent Christian Zionist organizations is instructive. Christians United for Israel (CUFI) was formed in 2006 and immediately became one of the main players in the Christian Zionist movement. Its founder and motivating personality is John Hagee, senior pastor at Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas. Hagee began by organizing a “Night to Honor Israel,” which has since become an annual event, bringing in millions of dollars in donations. In 2006 Hagee created CUFI, which boasts that it is “the largest Christian grassroots movement in America,” with tens of thousands of members located in all fifty states. The organization’s first goal is “to educate and build Christian support for Israel throughout America,” which it does through e-mails, a magazine, a major website, and summits and conferences across the U.S. and in Israel. The “education” provided by CUFI is unabashedly partisan, with the information tailored to enhance sympathy and support for Israel. The organization’s second objective is “to communicate pro-Israel perspectives to our elected officials.” To accomplish this goal, CUFI actively lobbies in Washington and has built a “rapid response” system that can mobilize its members into sending “millions of phone calls and emails” to Congress and the White House when critical issues regarding Israel arise.(8)

In swearing unconditional faithfulness to Israel, the broader Christian Zionist movement typically ignores, marginalizes, misrepresents, or vilifies Palestinians, Arabs, and other predominantly Muslim states, particularly Iran. Christian Zionists generally reject a two-state solution in Palestine-Israel, because they believe the Bible gives the entire “Holy Land” (and beyond) to the Jews, therefore leaving nothing for the Palestinians. To parcel out the land in a peace deal, they maintain, would not only violate God’s word but would also show a lack of faith in God’s ability to deliver on His promises.(9) Christian Zionist publications frequently dwell on attacks against Jews by Muslims, with scant mention of the numerically greater losses inflicted on Palestinians by the Israeli army. Radical Islamic terrorism, bellicose rhetoric from Iran’s leaders, and the growing political strength—not to mention militant activities—of Hamas and Hizbullah are commonly
A number of elected officials in both the United States and Israel have recently formed caucuses in the House of Representatives and Knesset that seek to strengthen the unequivocal alliance not only between the two nations but also between Christians and Jews. In January 2004 Knesset Member Yuri Shtern created a Christian Allies Caucus in the Knesset, with the explicit mission to nurture relationships with Christian groups who champion Israel. In turn, following the Israel-Lebanon conflict of summer 2006, several members of the U.S. House of Representatives formed the bipartisan and interfait Congressional Israel Allies Caucus.

Similar to hard-line Jewish settlers such as Gush Emunim, the ideological position and political power of Christian Zionists has negatively influenced prospects for a peace agreement in Palestine-Israel. The only real prospect for peace in the Middle East, they say, is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and that will only happen when Jews are in full control of Israel and have rebuilt their temple (on the site where the Dome of the Rock, one of the holiest sites in Islam, currently stands). When it was pointed out that some of their extreme positions on Israel’s unconditional sovereignty and the expansion of settlements may conflict with U.S. policy and interests in the region, Pastor Hagee replied, “I am a Bible scholar and a theologian, and from my perspective the law of God transcends the laws of the United States government and the U.S. State Department.” In multiple instances Christian Zionists have helped push American foreign policy further toward an unconditional alliance with Israel than national interests alone might dictate.

The Political Influence of Christian Zionism

No one knows precisely how many Christian Zionists there are in America, but the best estimates place their strength at between 20-40 million out of a population of 307 million. In addition, significant numbers of Americans hold views identical with or sympathetic to Christian Zionist platforms, even if they do not identify themselves as such. These Christian Zionist views are particularly strong in the southern United States and among evangelical, fundamentalist, and black Protestants. The remarkable social networking and political organization among Christian Zionist groups have allowed them to exert considerable influence in Washington policymaking circles, especially in the conservative political climate of recent years. Christian Zionists parlay their numerical strength into political muscle, working alongside the well-documented Jewish lobby to push elected representatives into more decisively pro-Israeli positions than they might normally arrive at on their own. One former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan observed candidly that Christian Zionism “colors the environment in which [U.S. foreign policy] decisions are made.”

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Jewish Attitudes toward Christian Zionism

The Jewish community in Israel and America is divided in its relationship with Christian Zionism. According to an August 2008 poll, only 7% of American Jews favor prominent Christian Zionist leader John Hagee, while 57% see him in an unfavorable light. Traditionally, liberal and secular Jews in the U.S. have been harsh critics of Christian Zionists. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, dissuades Jews from building alliances with Christian Zionists because they “do not speak respectfully of other faith communities,” Islam in particular. Furthermore, Yoffie claims that Christian Zionists champion only those Jewish leaders and groups who conform with their own ideology, rejecting those who would accept land concessions and a Palestinian state in exchange for peace. Some Jews openly question the motives and sincerity of Christian Zionists, suspecting their friendliness is only a cover for an underlying desire to proselytize. They point out that many Christian Zionists believe that when Jesus returns Jews must either accept him as the Messiah or be destroyed. Furthermore, many conservative religious Jews are skeptical of any form of Zionism, seeing it as a secular project that takes the prerogative of divine history out of the hands of God.

On the other hand, many Jews have built alliances with Christian Zionists. Senator Lieberman’s rapturous address to CUFI has already been noted. Many American Jewish religious leaders have been won over by the dedication of Christian Zionist groups to Israel and the welfare of its Jewish citizens. The executive director of CUFI, David Brog, is himself a Jew, and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), eager to find new sources of financial and political support for Israel, invited John Hagee to be the keynote speaker of its 2007 conference. Indeed, many American Jews see the partnership with Christian Zionists as a matter of pragmatic convenience, if not necessity. Many Israeli Jews have also warmed to the relationship. A number of prominent rabbis in Israel have embraced Christian Zionist theology as a welcome alternative to anti-Semitism. Some Israeli politicians have been quick to capitalize on the Christian Zionists’ generous support; Likud leader and current Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu recently went so far as to proclaim that Christian Zionists are “Israel’s best friends.”

Cited to heighten anxiety regarding the perpetual threat toward Israel, and the necessity of Christian action to counter Muslim aggression. In sum, the Christian Zionist message primarily takes on a positive, even exuberant, tone in its support for Israel. The flip side is a more discreet, but no less real, blindness to the plight of the Palestinian people and prejudice against the religion and politics of the Arab-Muslim world.
Conclusion: The Prospects of Christian Zionism

It is almost certain that Christian Zionism’s direct political influence will wane somewhat with a Democratic majority in Congress and a new president that will be less inclined toward Christian Zionism on a personal level. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to believe that Christian Zionism will simply fade away. Indeed, a changing of the guard in Washington may prove to embolden Christian Zionist efforts, as they will feel the need to work even harder in their struggle to save Israel and the Jews. The grassroots members of CUFI and other similar groups will continue to mobilize around news portraying Israel as existentially threatened by militant Islamists. Christian Zionists will persist in playing an important supporting role in the broader pro-Israel lobby, which enjoys significant influence with members of both political parties.

In their denunciations of Christian Zionism as an unsavory theological or political ideology, critics have sometimes called for it to disappear completely. This proposal is as intolerant as it is unfeasible. Christian Zionists have as much right to their distinctive religious beliefs as any other group, and will hold fast to those beliefs in spite of (and even fueled by) outside criticism. Thinking of Christian Zionism as a political problem that needs a political solution is counterproductive. Instead, Christian Zionists must be engaged and appealed to on the level of their deep Christian faith. Non-Zionist Christian leaders and laity must reach out to Zionists and hold sustained and serious discussions regarding the imperatives of their faith, stressing the need to respect Palestinian human rights as part of the Christian gospel of love. Deepening ties between Christian communities in America and Palestine would be one obvious and fruitful approach. The security and sovereignty of the state of Israel must be reconciled with the humanity and right to self-determination of Palestinians from a theological and not just political perspective. Naturally, this can only occur if Christian Zionists are willing to shed the black-and-white concept of “innocent” Israelis victimized by “terrorist” Palestinians and become educated about the true complexity of the situation, including the systemic violations of Palestinian human rights by Israel.

Failing the unlikely “conversion” of Christian Zionists, the most effective way to counteract their influence will be for moderate and liberal Christians to more fully and compellingly articulate a theological vision that will speak to the hearts and minds of their fellow American Christians, and then mobilize accordingly. In a politically and theologically pluralist America, policy is and will be shaped less by those who believe they are right than those who can leverage that belief in the political arena. The true challenge Christian Zionism poses, therefore, is whether the non-Zionist majority in America — both Christian and non-Christian — can develop a convincing counter narrative that can compete as a spiritually attractive and politically powerful ideology.

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FURTHER READING


11. An August 2006 poll revealed that 42% of Americans believe that God gave Israel to the Jews; 35% believe that Israel is part of

14. The founding members of the Israel Allies Caucus included Dave Weldon (R-FL), Eliot Engel (D-NY), Trent Franks (R-AZ), and


12. An example of this was President Bush’s about-face after initially demanding that Israel withdraw its forces from Palestinian territo-

10. See, for instance, the rhetoric on the Christians United for Israel webpage (www.cufi.org). While not necessarily distorting facts,


9. See Robert O. Smith, “Between Restoration and Liberation: Theopolitical Contributions and Responses to U.S. Foreign Policy in


7. Hagee gained national media exposure when John McCain sought his endorsement for his 2008 presidential campaign. The two


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