

The Influence of the Christian Right on U.S. Middle East Policy

By Stephen Zunes | June 28, 2004

In recent years a politicized and right-wing Protestant fundamentalist movement has emerged as a major factor in U.S. support for the policies of the rightist Likud government in Israel. To understand this influence, it is important to recognize that the rise of the religious right as a political force in the United States is a relatively recent phenomenon that emerged as part of a calculated strategy by leading right-wingers in the Republican Party who—while not fundamentalist Christians themselves—recognized the need to enlist the support of this key segment of the American population in order to achieve political power.

Traditionally, American fundamentalist Protestants were not particularly active in national politics, long seen as worldly and corrupt. This changed in the late 1970s as part of a calculated effort by conservative Republican operatives who recognized that as long as the Republican Party was primarily identified with militaristic foreign policies and economic proposals that favored the wealthy, it would remain a minority party. Over the previous five decades, Republicans had won only four out of 12 presidential elections and had controlled Congress for only two of its 24 sessions.

By mobilizing rightist religious leaders and adopting conservative positions on highly-charged social issues such as women's rights, abortion, sex education, and homosexuality, Republican strategists were able to bring millions of fundamentalist Christians—who as a result of their lower-than-average income were not otherwise inclined to vote Republican—into their party. Through such organizations as the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition, the GOP promoted a right-wing political agenda through radio and television broadcasts as well as from the pulpit. Since capturing this pivotal constituency, Republicans have won four out of six presidential races, have dominated the Senate for seven out of 12 sessions, and have controlled the House of Representatives for the past decade.

As a result of being politically wooed, those who identify with the religious right are now more likely than the average American to vote and to be politically active. The Christian Right constitutes nearly one out of seven American voters and determines the agenda of the Republican Party in about half of the states, particularly in the South and Midwest. A top Republican staffer noted: “Christian conservatives have proved to be the political base for most Republicans. Many of these guys, especially the leadership, are real believers in this stuff, and so are their constituents.”

The Movement Takes Office

The Rev. Barry Lynn of Americans United for Separation of Church and State recently quipped: “The good news is that the Christian Coalition is fundamentally collapsing. The bad news is that the people who ran it are all in the government.” He noted, for example, that when he goes to the Justice Department, he keeps seeing lawyers formerly employed by prominent right-wing fundamentalist preacher Pat Robertson.

As the *Washington Post* observed, “For the first time since religious conservatives became a modern political movement, the president of the United States has become the movement's de facto leader.” Former Christian Coalition leader Ralph Reed marked the



triumph by chortling, “You’re no longer throwing rocks at the building; you’re in the building.” He added that God “knew George Bush had the ability to lead in this compelling way.”

American liberals have long supported Israel as a refuge for persecuted Jews and have championed the country’s democratic institutions (for its Jewish citizens). Historically these liberals, bolstered by the disproportionate political influence of Zionist Jews within the party, prompted Democrats to adopt a hard line toward Palestinians and other Arabs. Though more hawkish on most foreign policy issues, Republicans traditionally took a somewhat more moderate stance partly due to the party’s ties to the oil industry and in part because of GOP concern that too much support for Israel could lead Arab nationalists toward a pro-Soviet or—in more recent years—a pro-Islamist orientation. But this alignment has shifted, thanks to the influence of the Christian Right. Though Christian fundamentalist support for Israel dates back many years, only recently has it become one of the movement’s major issues.

As a result of renewed fundamentalist interest in Israel and in recognition of the movement’s political influence, American Jews are less reluctant to team up with the Christian Right. Fundamentalist leader Gary Bauer, for example, now receives frequent invitations to address mainstream Jewish organizations, which would have been hesitant toward the movement prior to the Bush presidency. This is partly a phenomenon of demographics: Jews constitute only 3 percent of the U.S. population, and barely half of them support the current Israeli government.

The Israelis also recognize the Christian Right’s political clout. Since 2001, Bauer has met with several Israeli Cabinet members and with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu noted, “We have no greater friends and allies” than right-wing American Christians.

It used to be that Republican administrations had the ability to withstand pressure from Zionist lobbying groups when it was deemed important for American interests. For example, the Eisenhower administration pressured Israel during the Suez Crisis of 1956, the Reagan administration sold AWACS-

equipped planes to Saudi Arabia in 1981, and the first Bush administration delayed a \$10 billion loan guarantee for Israel to await the outcome of the pivotal 1992 Israeli election.

With the growing influence of the Christian Right, however, such detachment is no longer as easily achieved. For the first time, the Republican Party has a significant pro-Israel constituency of its own that it cannot ignore. Top White House officials, including Elliott Abrams, director of the National Security Council on Near East and North African Affairs, have regular and often lengthy meetings with representatives of the Christian Right. As one leading Republican put it: “They are very vocal and have shifted the center of gravity toward Israel and against concessions. It colors the environment in which decisions are being made.” Indeed, the degree of the Bush administration’s support for Prime Minister Sharon has surprised even the most hard-line Zionist Jews.

Rising Power of Christian Zionists

It appears, then, that right-wing Christian Zionists are, at this point, more significant in the formulation of U.S. policy toward Israel than are Jewish Zionists, as illustrated by three recent incidents.

- After the Bush administration’s initial condemnation of the attempted assassination of militant Palestinian Islamist Abdel Aziz Rantisi in June 2003, the Christian Right mobilized its constituents to send thousands of e-mails to the White House protesting the criticism. A key element in these e-mails was the threat that if such pressure continued to be placed upon Israel, the Christian Right would stay home on Election Day. Within 24 hours, there was a notable change in tone by the president. Indeed, when Rantisi fell victim to a successful Israeli assassination in April 2004, the administration—as it did with the assassination of Hamas leader Sheik Ahmed Yassin the previous month—largely defended the Israeli action.
- When the Bush administration insisted that Israel stop its April 2002 military offensive in the West Bank, the White House received over 100,000 e-mails from Christian conservatives in protest of its

criticism. Almost immediately, President Bush came to Israel's defense. Over the objections of the State Department, the Republican-led Congress adopted resolutions supporting Israel's actions and blaming the violence exclusively on the Palestinians.

- When President Bush announced his support for the Road Map for Middle East peace, the White House received more than 50,000 postcards over the next two weeks from Christian conservatives opposing any plan that called for the establishment of a Palestinian state. The administration quickly backpedaled, and the once-highly touted Road Map essentially died.

Theological Influences: Good Versus Evil

Messianic theology is centered around the belief in a hegemonic Israel as a necessary precursor to the second coming of Christ. Although this doctrine is certainly an important part of the Christian Right's support of a militaristic and expansionist Jewish state, fundamentalist Christian Zionism in America ascribes to an even more dangerous dogma: that of Manichaeism, the belief that reality is divided into absolute good and absolute evil.

The day after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, President Bush declared, "This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil, but good will prevail." America was targeted—according to President Bush—not on account of U.S. support for Arab dictatorships, the large U.S. military presence in the Middle East, U.S. backing of the Israeli occupation, or the humanitarian consequences of U.S. policy toward Iraq but simply because they "hate our freedom." Despite the Gospels' insistence that the line separating good and evil does not run between nations but rather within each person, President Bush cited Christological texts to support his war aims in the Middle East, declaring, "And the light [America] has shown in the darkness [the enemies of America], and the darkness will not overcome it [American shall conquer its enemies]."

Even more disturbingly, Bush has stated repeatedly that he was "called" by God to run for president. Veteran journalist Bob Woodward noted, "The

President was casting his mission and that of the country in the grand vision of God's Master Plan," wherein he promised, in his own words, "to export death and violence to the four corners of the earth in defense of this great country and rid the world of evil." In short, President Bush believes that he has accepted the responsibility of leading the free world as part of God's plan. He even told then-Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas that "God told me to strike al-Qaida and I struck them, and then he instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did." Iraq has become the new Babylon, and the "war on terrorism" has succeeded the Cold War with the Soviet Union as the quintessential battle between good and evil.

Cultural Affinities

The esprit that many Americans have with Israel is rooted in a common historical mission. Each country was settled in part by victims fleeing religious persecution who fashioned a new nation rooted in high ideals with a political system based upon relatively progressive and democratic institutions. And both peoples established their new nations through the oppression, massacre, and dislocation of indigenous populations. Like many Israelis, Americans often confuse genuine religious faith with nationalist ideology.

John Winthrop, the influential 17th century Puritan theologian, saw America as the "City on the Hill" (Zion) and "a light upon nations." In effect, there is a kind of American Zionism assuming a divinely inspired singularity that excuses what would otherwise be considered unacceptable behavior. Just as Winthrop defended the slaughter of the indigenous Pequot peoples of colonial Massachusetts as part of a divine plan, 19th century theologians defended America's westward expansion as "manifest destiny" and the will of God. Such theologically rooted aggrandizement did not stop at the Pacific Ocean: the invasion of the Philippines in the 1890s was justified by President William McKinley and others as part of an effort to "uplift" and "Christianize" the natives, ignoring the fact that the Filipinos (who by that time had nearly rid the country of Spanish colonialists and had established the first democratic con-

stitution in Asia) were already over 90 percent Christian.

Similarly, today—in the eyes of the Christian Right—the Bush Doctrine and the expansion of American military and economic power is all part of a divine plan. For example, in their 2003 Christmas card, Vice President Dick Cheney and his wife Lynne included the quote, “And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?”

But is such thinking normative in the United States? Polls show that the ideological gap between Christian conservatives and other Americans regarding the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the “war on terrorism” is even higher than the ideological gap between Christian conservatives and other Americans regarding Israel and Palestine.

In many respects, much of the American right may be at least as concerned about how Israel can help the United States as about how the United States can help Israel. Due to the anti-Semitism inherent in much of Christian Zionist theology, it has long been recognized that U.S. fundamentalist support for Israel does not stem from a concern for the Jewish people per se but rather from a desire to leverage Jewish jingoism to hasten the Second Coming of Christ. Such opportunism is also true of those who—for theological or other reasons—seek to advance the American Empire in the Middle East. And though a strong case can be made that U.S. support for the Israeli occupation ultimately hurts U.S. interests, there remains a widely held perception that Israel is an important asset to American strategic objectives in the Middle East and beyond.

Strategic Calculation Trumps Ethno-Religious Card

Ultimately, Washington’s championing of Israel—like its approval of other repressive governments—is part of a strategic calculation rather than simply ethnic politics. When a choice must be made, geopolitical considerations outweigh ethnic loyalties. For example, for nearly a quarter of a century, the United States supported the brutal occupation of East Timor by Indonesia and to this day supports the Moroccan

occupation of Western Sahara, despite the absence of powerful Indonesian-American or Moroccan-American ethnic lobbying forces. The United States was able to get away with its support for occupations by Indonesia and Morocco due to their relative obscurity. This is certainly not the case with Israel and Palestine. (Interestingly, even though the East Timor situation involved a predominantly Muslim country conquering, occupying, and terrorizing a predominantly Christian country, virtually no protests arose from the Islamophobic Christian Right.)

The Christian Right has long been a favorite target for the Democratic Party, particularly its liberal wing, since most Americans are profoundly disturbed by fundamentalists of any kind influencing policies of a government with a centuries-old tradition of separating church and state. Yet the positions of most liberal Democrats in Congress regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are far closer to those of the reactionary Christian Coalition than to those of the moderate National Council of Churches, far closer to the rightist Rev. Pat Robertson than to the leftist Rev. William Sloan Coffin, far closer to the ultraconservative Moral Majority than to the liberal Churches for Middle East Peace, and far closer to the fundamentalist Southern Baptist Convention than to any of the mainline Protestant churches. Rather than accusing these erstwhile liberals of being captives of the Jewish lobby—a charge that inevitably leads to the counter-charge of anti-Semitism—those who support justice for the Palestinians should instead reproach congressional Democrats for falling captive to the Christian Right. Such a rebuke would be no less accurate and would likely enhance the ability of those who support peace, justice, and the rule of law to highlight the profound immorality of congressional sanction for the Israeli occupation.

Those who support justice for the Palestinians—or even simply the enforcement of basic international humanitarian law—must go beyond raising awareness of the issue to directly confronting those whose acquiescence facilitates current repressive attitudes. It will not be possible to counter the influence of the Christian Right in shaping American policies in the Middle East as long as otherwise-socially conscious

Christian legislators and other progressive-minded elected officials are beholden to fundamentalist voting pressures. It is unlikely that these Democrats and moderate Republicans will change, however, until liberal-to-mainline churches mobilize their resources toward demanding justice as strongly as right-wing fundamentalists have mobilized their resources in support of repression.

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