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## **THE ARMAGEDDON LOBBY: DISPENSATIONALIST CHRISTIAN ZIONISM AND THE SHAPING OF US POLICY TOWARDS ISRAEL-PALESTINE<sup>1</sup>**

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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates the history of contemporary Christian Zionism in the United States and the impact of this movement on US policy issues related to Israel-Palestine. Dispensationalist Christian Zionists, often described the ‘Armageddon lobby’, make up the largest voting bloc in the Republican Party and have become a mainstay in US politics. More recently, the Christian Zionist lobby has had a profoundly damaging impact on the Israeli-Palestinian ‘peace process’ as well as creating a conspiracy of silence regarding Israeli offensives in the occupied Palestinian territories. Though the ‘Armageddon lobby’ has been successful in its efforts as a pro-Israel lobby, its influence is in fact counterproductive to Israel because the lobby hinders the prospect of Israel living in peace because of their policy of deterring the progression of negotiations.

### **1. Introduction to Christian Zionism**

While the alliance between America’s Christian Zionists and the pro-Israel lobby has been in existence for decades now, more recently it has become critical to examine this dynamic relationship because of the current volatile state resulting from the current Palestinian Intifada (uprising). With nearly 10 per cent of US voters declaring themselves as Zionist or dispensationalist

1. This article is based on a graduate thesis written towards a Master’s degree in Government at Harvard University, which was completed in 2005. I am indebted to Professor Paul D. Hanson of Harvard University and Professor Saliba Sarsar of Monmouth University for their useful comments on this article.

Christians, and another 35 per cent constituting mainstream Christianity, the Christian Zionist lobby has targeted both voting pools for its purpose of assembling a pro-Israel constituency among American voters through the promotion of biblical and dispensationalist doctrine.

There are many names and titles for the Christian Zionists in the United States. Some call them the 'Armageddon Lobby', others have referred to them as the 'Christian AIPAC'. These nicknames are minor examples of the motives and unconditional support for Israel among the Christian-Right, which have made it an instrumental actor in a pro-US policy towards Israel. This position has been especially solidified among the powerful elites in US policy. An article published in *Time* magazine following the aftermath of the Israeli Defense Force's infamous incursions into the West Bank in 2002 states: 'Today the most influential lobbying on behalf of Israel is being done by a group not usually seen as an ally of the largely Democratic Jewish community: Evangelical Christians' (Ratnesar 2002: 26).

In the late 1970s, Israel was desperately trying to improve its image in the international arena, but wanted to do this without yielding much in the way of territorial or political concessions. Israel had drawn a large amount of international support by its participation in the Camp David Peace Accords with Egypt in 1978. However, the State was still experiencing a negative international disposition from the 1975 United Nations Resolution 3379 that concluded: 'Zionism is a form of racism and discrimination' (United Nations 1975: 84). It was also around this same time that the formal Christian-Right was established and Jewish organisations began understanding that an alliance with the Christian Zionists in the US could bolster their image and prominence on the international level through a stronger influence in US politics.

The fervency of the Christian-Right towards the State of Israel coupled with its strong American presence captured the attention of Israeli interest groups. Though aware of their diametric social and religious views, Jewish political organisations saw an alliance with the Christian Zionists as a crucial element in promoting a positive image of Israel in US politics and among the American mainstream. Jewish-American leaders were initially opposed to an alliance with the Christian-Right and perceived the movement as a possible adversary (Brownfield 2002: 71). However, when the formal establishment of the Christian-Right solidified this movement as an influential political bloc in the US, these feelings of trepidation were soon dissipated and Israeli groups recognised that an alliance with this bloc would be advantageous to their political interests.

## 2. Formal Establishment of the Alliance

In the late 1970s, there was a growing unrest among conservative Christians in the US over the lack of political mobilisation of their constituency. They felt that their agendas could be better applied if there was a recognised body from which they were proposed. Thus, in 1979, Reverend Jerry Falwell launched an organisation known as the Moral Majority with the aim 'to mobilize the Christian church on behalf of moral and social issues and to encourage participation by people of faith in the political process'.<sup>2</sup> The Moral Majority quickly became a household name. Through its charismatic public leader, the organisation mobilised thousands of churches and millions of registered voters to form a Christian political bloc, and what is now known as the Christian-Right.

When political strategists began studying the importance of the Christian-Right to American politics, it was found that this group was the largest social movement in the US, and comprised the largest voting bloc within the Republican Party (Berlet and Hardisty 2003). On an Israeli-sponsored visit to the Holy Land in 1979, reacting to a growing Jewish settlement near the Palestinian town of Nablus, Falwell declared, 'God had been good to America because America had been good to the Jews' (Brownfield 2002: 71). Falwell's fervour was genuine, but these Israeli-sponsored visits were strategic. Israel viewed the Moral Majority's constituency as an added dimension for promoting Israeli interests to the US government.

Only a few months after the establishment of the Moral Majority, Falwell and long-time evangelist Billy Graham were formally invited to a gala dinner in New York City by then Likud leader and Israeli Prime Minister Menahem Begin. The occasion was the presentation of the Jabotinsky Centennial Medal, named after Vladimir Jabotinsky, the right-wing Zionist leader. The medal is awarded by the State of Israel to a person who is considered a lifetime friend of the nation (Anderson 2002: 77). That year, the inaugural medals were awarded to Jerry Falwell and Billy Graham, acknowledging the two as long-time staunch supporters of Israel. It is upon this awarding that we conclude that the formal alliance between the Christian-Right and Israel had begun.

Oddly, during this inaugural awarding, reports surfaced that Falwell had been given a Learjet by Israeli Prime Minister Begin on behalf of the State of Israel to show appreciation for Falwell's fervent support of the nation. The late author Grace Halsell wrote extensively on the Moral Majority, and in one interview she stated:

I did document the fact that Israel had given Jerry Falwell a jet airplane, which is a nice gift. He uses it to go around and he uses that jet, politically,

2. 'Biography of Dr. Jerry Falwell', at: <http://www.liberty.edu/PublicRelations/index.cfm?PID=1365> (accessed on 12 January 2005).

I would say. I personally heard Jerry Falwell thank Israeli leader Moshe Arens<sup>3</sup> when I was traveling with Falwell. He didn't know I was writing a book, but I traveled with two of his delegations that went to Israel (Halsell 2000).

The Jabotinsky Centennial Medal, as well as the Learjet, created a strong relationship between Begin and Falwell, which later became useful to the Israeli Prime Minister. When Israel unilaterally bombed Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981, Begin immediately called Jerry Falwell and requested that the Evangelist rally American Christian support for Israel's unilateral action (Brownfield 2002: 71).

Falwell used his organisation as a conduit for promoting support for Israel's political interests and, in 1985, an organisation associated with the Moral Majority, known as the National Christian Leadership Conference for Israel (NCLCI), organised by Franklin Littell, spearheaded the campaign to repeal UN Resolution 3379.<sup>4</sup>

### **3. Early Achievements of the Christian-Right**

Littell was one of the original founders of the contemporary Israel-first ideology that Falwell came to embrace. In the 1950s and early 1960s when France was Israel's strongest ally and chief weapons provider, Littell became concerned for the State. It was widely-known that the relationship France maintained with Israel was out of a strategic interest of retaining control over the Suez Canal in Egypt (Chaya 2004). Littell believed that for the security of the State of Israel there needed to be an unconditional alliance, one based not on political motivations, but with a religious foundation. Littell used his influence as a Christian leader to dedicate a career to supporting the State of Israel and developing this unconditional alliance. Shortly after the Six-Day War in June of 1967, Littell established Christians Concerned for Israel (CCI), an organisation designed 'to reactivate the pro-Israel spirit in the mainline Protestant churches'.<sup>5</sup> At that time, Littell and his organisation were only a small minority. There was increased support for the Palestinian cause in the mainline Protestant and Catholic churches, particularly among the leadership. Littell viewed this as a threat to Israel and sought the expansion of the CCI to help curtail this growing trend.

Littell's mobilisations proved to be successful on two issues that were critical for Israel. In both efforts Littell was a major player in creating a verdict in Israel's favour. The first came in 1978 when the US was considering the sale of F-15s and other reconnaissance equipment to its Middle East ally, Saudi Arabia. Israel and the Israeli lobby in the US applied heavy

3. Israeli Minister of Defense, 1983-1984, 1990-1992.

4. NCLCI, at: [www.nclci.org](http://www.nclci.org) (accessed on 22 January 2005).

5. David Blewett, 'Christian Support for Israel', at: <http://www.nclci.org/##Articles/art-blewett-cjrelations.htm> (accessed in January 2003).

pressure on Congress and President Jimmy Carter's administration to withdraw the sale commitment. Israel's persistent efforts, however, did not pay off until Littell helped organise a considerable number of Christians to head to Washington D.C. and call on the Carter Administration to block the sale. Their efforts were successful and the US withdrew its offer to sell the reconnaissance planes and equipment.

The second issue came about during the mobilisation in Washington against the sale of AWACS to the Saudis. According to David Blewett,<sup>6</sup> there was '[an] unexpectedly large turnout of concerned Christians and Christian groups, several of whom had never heard of one another, [which] led to the organisation of the NCLCI, with the CCI membership as its nucleus'. The NCLCI, which Littell helped organise, was instrumental in promoting the Christian-Right campaign to repeal UN Resolution 3379. While the initial call for action against UN Resolution 3379 came from the NCLCI, it was echoed by Falwell and other leaders in the Moral Majority, and this brought great notoriety to the issue.

UN Resolution 3379 was initially introduced at the Conference of Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Non-Aligned Countries in Lima, Peru, in August of 1975 (United Nations 1975:84). After this resolution was endorsed at the conference, it was proposed before the UN General Assembly two months later. The entire scope of the resolution was not centrally focused on Israel. Only the final nine words of this 450-word resolution were directed towards Israel. The resolution was intended to reprimand all forms of racism and discrimination on the part of UN member nations. Christian Zionists were strongly opposed to UN Resolution 3379 but after the Third Committee in the UN General Assembly adopted it, Israeli efforts to overturn it appeared as though they would be futile.

The adoption of this resolution was followed by a long-standing effort by Israeli lobby groups requesting the US to exert pressure on the UN. However, these efforts were ineffective. When the Christian-Right lobby joined the effort, officials in Washington began responding to the pressure. Christian-Right organisations called on their constituents to write to their members of Congress and ask them to support the repeal of the resolution. There was a strong campaign against the resolution at the 1985 Feast of the Tabernacles.<sup>7</sup> Those in attendance were given pamphlets, entitled 'Danger at the UN', which attacked the resolution as being not only anti-Zionist but anti-Semitic as well.

On 23 January 1990 a group of Congressional representatives proposed House Resolution 457 that called on the UN to repeal Resolution 3379.

6. David Blewett, 'Christian Support for Israel', at: <http://www.nclci.org/##Articles/art-blewett-cjrelations.htm> (accessed in January 2003).

7. The Feast of the Tabernacles is an ingathering of Christians who flock to Israel during the Sukkoth holiday to celebrate the State of Israel and Christianity's biblical roots.

House Resolution 457 stated that ‘Zionism is a national movement of the Jewish people for self-determination, a legitimate and moral aspiration characteristic of many national groups in the modern world. [United] Nations General Assembly Resolution 3379 has had as its overt purpose the delegitimation of the State of Israel’.<sup>8</sup> The US President during the time, George H.W. Bush, supported the House resolution and it was passed. On 3 May 1990 a similar resolution, Senate Joint Resolution 246, was proposed by Senator George Mitchell and adopted unanimously.<sup>9</sup> The efforts towards repealing UN Resolution 3379 would prove to be fruitful as the resolution condemning Zionism was overturned in 1991. US pressure to repeal the resolution was likely the key factor in the repeal of UN Resolution 3379, because historically UN resolutions are rarely repealed. It may be argued that the Christian Zionists rather than Congress deserve the credit for repealing the resolution.

#### **4. Theology of Apocalyptic Dispensationalism**

There are two common approaches by which Christian Zionists usually justify support for ‘*Eretz Yisrael*’ (Land of Israel) and its ‘people’. First is the belief found in the Book of Genesis 12:3, which states, ‘I will bless those who bless you, whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you’. Based on this verse, many non-dispensationalist Christians feel compelled to embrace Israel as a premise of faith and as an assurance that blessings will be bestowed on those who ideologically and financially bless the ‘chosen people’. This argument has produced much disagreement from both Christians and non-Christians. Some Christian scholars argue that Jews have arrogantly misinterpreted the context of this verse and Christian Zionists have ignorantly accepted it.

Old Testament scholars express grave concern with the misinterpretations of the Bible by Christians and Jews alike (Domb 1989; Beck 1991). Rabbi Domb believes that the State of Israel was established without the blessings of God because it was established by force, and the Torah tells its believers ‘not to ascend to the Holy Land as a group using force’ as is written in Tractate Kesubos 111a (Domb 1989). Christian Zionists have accepted Genesis 12:3 as a message from God delivered to the Jewish people in Old Testament time. Thus, Christian Zionists have embraced this literally as a premise of faith that has God promising to bless those who blessed his ‘chosen people’ (Anderson 2002).

The second approach to the subscription of Zionist ideology is ‘based on dispensationalist theology’, which states that we are living in the last

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8. ‘H. J. Resolution 457’, *Congressional Reference Records*, 101st United States Congress, 23 January 1990.

9. 32nd United States Senate, ‘S.J. Resolution 246’, *Daily Digest*, 3 May 1990: S5685.

dispensation of the Book of Revelation, which essentially means that we are in the end-times. Within this theology, the return of the Messiah is contingent upon a set of events transpiring, and among these, a Jewish State of Israel must be in existence.

The dispensationalist theology is the guiding ideology for the Christian Zionist movement. According to Tony Campolo, the creation of dispensationalist theology can be credited to a nineteenth-century Anglican priest from Plymouth, England, named John Nelson Darby. Though Darby remains a little known historical theologian, his theology has permeated much of the Christian-Right movement of today. As Campolo writes, 'without understanding dispensationalism, however, it is almost impossible to understand how Christian Zionism has come to dominate American Evangelicalism and been so influential on the course of US Middle East policy' (Campolo 2005: 19).

While it was Darby who is credited with the creation of dispensationalist theology, it was another man, Cyrus Ingerson Scofield, who is credited with spreading dispensationalist theology in the nineteenth century. In 1909, Scofield published a study Bible, *Scofield Reference Bible*, and this is the source that was used by early dispensationalists to promote dispensationalist theology (Scofield 1909). In fact it was that Bible which, according to Campolo, became 'by far the most popular study Bible ever published' (Campolo 2005: 19). The study of dispensationalist theology is often referred to as Scofieldism, and many scholars argue that Scofieldism is incorrectly described as a biblical theology when rather it should be thought of as a political theology. '[Scofieldism] is highly political and it gets so that it controls what goes on in the White House and controls what goes on in Congress. It's a vast number of Christians who are influencing Congress and the President' (Halsell 2000).

#### 4.1 *Teaching of the 'Rapture'*

One of the fundamental teachings of Scofield was the theology of the 'rapture'. The 'rapture' refers to the dispensationalist belief that prior to the coming of the Messiah, God will remove all of his true believers from earth, and this will take place either before, after, or during the reign of the anti-Christ. Dispensationalists believe that this will occur without warning, and all of God's true followers will vanish in an instant and their souls will ascend to heaven while all of those who are non-believers will be 'left behind'. Scofield was known to preach often about the 'rapture' in his sermons, and told his listeners that the present scenario was ripe for a 'rapturing' and that the followers of Christ should welcome this final catastrophe to the world because they would be taken to their father before the world's great suffering would begin (Brownfield 2002: 72).

The dispensationalist theology promoted by Darby and Scofield has



evolved since its inception and for this study the type of dispensationalism we will assess is 'premillennial dispensationalism' or 'progressive dispensationalism'. Currently, this is the most widely accepted form of dispensationalism. It holds that Christ will return prior to a literal end-times millennium (Wagner 2003). Progressive dispensationalism, which originated in the mid-1980s, sees more continuity between Israel and Evangelical Christians than the other two variations of dispensationalism. Progressive dispensationalism stresses that both Israel and Evangelical Christians comprise the 'people of God' and both are related to the blessings of the New Covenant. It is also important to realise that this definition of dispensationalism was revised in the mid-1980s, which is around the same time that the Christian-Right and Israel created a formal alliance.

This redefining of dispensationalism was likely done to soften the language used by earlier dispensationalists, which founded their 'rapture' belief on the destruction of the Holy Land and the catastrophic death of a large portion of Israel's Jewish population. (Campolo 2005). Despite the spiritual equality between Christians and Jews as defined by progressive dispensationalists, there still remain functional distinctions between the groups. Progressive dispensationalists do not equate the church as the State of Israel in this age, and they still see a future distinct identity and function for ethnic Israel in the coming millennial kingdom (Ryrie 1994: 20).

Dr Stephen R. Sizer, a noted scholar and critic on Christian Zionism, describes this unflinching belief of decoded biblical context as a 'literalist approach to biblical hermeneutics'.<sup>10</sup> He explains that Darby along with contemporary apocalyptic Christian Zionists such as Hal Lindsey have '[developed] erroneous views concerning Israel [on the basis of] an allegorical, non-literal hermeneutic'.<sup>11</sup> It is this specific 'decoding' of biblical context that has promoted the theology of dispensationalism and influenced Christian Zionists to give unconditional support to the State of Israel. Lindsey's writings refer to Old Testament predictions made by Daniel, which suggest that in the time just before the return of the Messiah, the knowledge of the species of man would grow immensely and the secrets of the universe would begin to reveal themselves through this greater knowledge. Lindsey (1997) suggests that this time of great knowledge is now, and through careful study of the Bible's clues, Lindsey believes that he has deciphered the hints of the fate of mankind and the fate of the earth.

Dispensationalist theology has seen a great revival among mainstream Christians in the US due mostly to the current state of volatility in the Middle East, which many believe is a prerequisite for the return of the

10. Stephen R. Sizer, 'Lindsey's Literalistic Dispensationalist Hermeneutic', *Hal Lindsey: The Father of Apocalyptic Zionism* (updated 11 April 1999), at: [www.sizers.org](http://www.sizers.org) (accessed on 20 January 2005).

11. *Ibid.*

Messiah. While America's mainstream Christians are unable to recognise the dispensationalist theology by name, this theology has found its way into mainstream Christian homes in an inconspicuous manner. The dispensationalist theory has seen growth among mainstream Christians who have been convinced of this theology through the best selling novel series *Left Behind* and other popular literature pertaining to dispensationalist theology. Books with dispensationalist themes are having a great impact on American political thought. In a review of the *Left Behind* series, Gershom Gorenberg writes: 'The *Left Behind* books are giving millions of people an interpretive paradigm in which extreme views seem sensible. Propaganda in the guise of fiction, they demand our attention' (Gorenberg 2002: 45). The *Left Behind* series is the most popular example of contemporary dispensationalism, and the *Left Behind* authors, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins (1996), are self-described dispensationalist Christian Zionists. The *Left Behind* series depicts scenarios of the 'rapture' and all of the chaos that ensues once the true believers of Christ have absconded to heaven and the remaining non-believers are left on earth. Though the books are classified as fiction, readers of this series are actually being taught the theologies of dispensationalism in a very subtle manner.

Dispensationalists believe that the initial 'rapture' will be followed by three-and-a-half years of pseudo-peace, referred to as the 'Abomination of Desolation', and is symbolically described as a ram and a goat in Daniel 8. Daniel 8:13-14 describes the message revealed to Daniel: 'Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to him, 'How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, and the surrender of the sanctuary and of the host that will be trampled underfoot?' He said to me, 'It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated' (Daniel 8:13-14). Of the three and a half years following the 'Abomination of Desolation' dispensationalists believe that this will be a time of many wars, famine and disease. This three-and-a-half year period following the 'Abomination of Desolation' is referred to as the 'Great Tribulation'.<sup>12</sup> During the 'Great Tribulation' dispensationalists believe that the earth will be completely overtaken by the anti-Christ. In Revelation 13 this beast will declare the number '666' and assign in to all peoples.

Dispensationalists believe that the anti-Christ will have immense world popularity and all those who oppose him will be ostracised from their societies. A simple Google query of the 'Abomination of Desolation' reveals 71,500 hits on the subject.<sup>13</sup> Some of these are personal homepages describing this period as a likely preparation for nuclear war or world annihilation. This

12. 'Rapture: The Left Behind', at: <http://biblia.com/coming/rapture.htm> (accessed on 23 Jan 2005).

13. Google search conducted on 10 March 2005

dispensationalist theology has not only become a personal belief, but also a matter of political undertaking for some Christian Zionists.

It is during the 'Great Tribulation' that dispensationalists believe that 144,000 Jews will convert to Christianity and this conversion will reveal to them the true intentions of the anti-Christ. Thus, these 144,000 converted Jews will become the epicentre of proselytising the Christian faith to all non-believers who were not 'raptured'. These 144,000 converted Jews will meet the anti-Christ for the final battle known as Armageddon, and the converted Jews will single-handedly defeat the anti-Christ (Campolo 2005). It is after this battle that the seven years of tribulation will conclude and upon this Jesus will return to defeat and imprison Satan and establish a Messianic Kingdom on earth for a period of one millennium.

Hal Lindsey, the noted dispensationalist, has written several books on the topic of dispensationalism. Lindsey's trademark is his use of current political situations to explain how the final days would unfold. One particular book written by Lindsey in 1970 was especially explicit in linking contemporary events to the end-times. In the best-seller, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, he discusses how the European Economic Community (EEC) represented the 10-headed beast referred to in the Book of Revelation, and how this 10-headed beast would pave the way for the anti-Christ to seize political and economic control of the world. It must have been to Lindsey's dismay when the EEC formed a partnership with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and later coalesced into the 27-member European Union of today.<sup>14</sup> Lindsey made several other errant predictions, such as his assertion that biblical coding has revealed that the 'rapture' would follow once Israel had been a nation for 40 years (Lindsey 1970). The 40-year mark of 1988 came and passed and 17 years later there has yet to be any documented mass disappearances attributed to a 'rapture'. Moreover, even Lindsey's often-erroneous predictions of the final days have not hurt his credibility, he still retains a steady group of dispensationalist followers through his books and television shows aired on the dispensationalist station, Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN).

### 5. Christian Zionism on the Wrong Track

The position among Christian Zionists is so uncompromising that even when Israelis themselves have suggested certain concessions be made on specific matters, Christian Zionists have appealed with fury. A poll conducted in late 2002 by one of Israel's foremost pollsters, Dr Mina Zenach, revealed that a vast majority of Israelis are in favour of unilateral withdrawal of 'all' or 'most of' the settlements in the Palestinian territories and support the

14. *The European Parliament*, 2005, at: [http://europa.eu.int/institutions/parliament/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/institutions/parliament/index_en.htm) (accessed on 24 January 2005).

establishment of a Palestinian state.<sup>15</sup> However, Christian Zionists seem proudly to ignore the desires of the Israeli majority, and discount reports such as a recently released study by the Methodist Church in Great Britain which concluded that an overwhelming majority of Palestinians ‘earnestly desire a just peace with Israel’.<sup>16</sup>

During the inaugural Christian Zionist Congress (CZC) conference held in Jerusalem in 1985, the convention featured both Christians and Jews. In one meeting there was a motion for a resolution calling on all Jews living outside of Israel to move to the State. Christians in attendance were unsatisfied with this motion and added that Israel must also annex the West Bank. Regarding this statement, an Israeli Jewish man suggested that this language be modified to a more moderate tone. Referring to an Israeli poll, the Jewish man stated that a third of Israel’s citizens would favour returning the West Bank to the Palestinians in exchange for peace. In response to his suggestion, the spokesperson for the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ) angrily replied, ‘We don’t care what the Israelis vote! We care what God says, and God gave that land to the Jews!’ (Halsell 1986). Despite the suggestion by the Israeli Jew of exchanging land for peace, the resolution calling for an annexation of the West Bank passed unanimously among the Christian voters at the conference.

In his book *Anxious for Armageddon*, Professor Donald Wagner describes personal experience of the exploitation of the Christian Zionist groups by the leadership of the Israeli government (Wagner 1995). Wagner also notes that while Jewish groups in the US and Israel vehemently oppose any sort of religious alliance with the Christian Zionists, they have accepted a political alliance with the movement because it creates another strong-arm for Israeli interests within US policy. Jewish political affairs committees as well as the Israeli leadership have contended that while they may disagree with the motives of Christian Zionists, their support on behalf of Israeli interests is welcomed. Jewish leaders such as Anti-Defamation League (ADL) director Abraham Foxman have stated that the Jewish leadership welcomes the support of Christian Zionists despite their disastrous prophecies concerning the Jewish people, ‘as long as it does not come with conditions’ (Foster 2003).

### 5.1 *Christian Zionist Counter Groups*

Some Christian leaders have formed ecumenical counter-Zionist organisations in response to their opposition to Christian Zionism. These

15. Gila Svirsky, ‘Spreading the Secret’, *Israeli Insider* (updated 15 July 2002) at: <http://web.israelinsider.com/Views/1236.htm> (accessed 10 September 2005).

16. ‘The Election of Mahmoud Abbas as Palestinian President’ (updated 14 January 2005), at: [http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=news.news\\_Detail&newsid=9](http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=news.news_Detail&newsid=9) (accessed on 10 September 2005).

organisations, such as Sabeel in Jerusalem, have established annual conferences in Jerusalem and in the US as well as web sites, such as *Challenging Christian Zionism*, to give people an alternative view of biblical interpretations of Zionism. These were created because many in the Christian community became 'disturbed by the growing influence of Christian Zionism on the political scene in America, recognizing [Christian Zionism] to be a major factor in the stalled peace process in the [Holy Land]. [These groups] hope to offer an alternative biblical view, one that reflects the true nature of God as a God of compassion and justice'.<sup>17</sup> Founder of Sabeel, Canon Naim Ateek presents the Palestinian Liberation Theological approach to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, an approach of justice, advocating non-violence and forgiveness towards the Israeli occupation (Ateek 2001). Ironically Ateek's adherence to the Christian principles of non-violence and forgiveness is in contrast to the policy of Christian Zionist leaders in the US, such as Falwell and Robertson, who regularly campaign for increased Israeli aggression towards the Palestinians.

In a response to the annual Christian Zionist gatherings in Jerusalem, such as the *Feast of the Tabernacles* and the *Christian Zionist Congress*, Sabeel organised an annual conference in Jerusalem featuring well-known academics and Palestinian liberation theologians from the US, Europe, and Palestine, challenging Christian Zionism and its philosophy. The growing presence of these established scholars has helped to solidify Sabeel's increasing influence in the US and Europe. The objective of the conference is to '[discuss the] modern theological and political movement that embraces the most extreme ideological positions of Zionism, thereby becoming detrimental to a just peace in the [Holy Land]/[This] movement, with its elevation of modern political Zionism, provides a worldview where the Gospel is identified with the ideology of empire, colonialism, and militarism'.<sup>18</sup>

These organisations that have been established to refute Zionism are not only made up of Christians but of Ultra-Orthodox and Reform Jews as well. While criticism of Christian Zionists by Jews is not widely-publicised, there have been many instances when Jewish communities in the US have mobilised and expressed their concern over a growing dependence on Christian Zionists as well as their scepticism over whether the alliance has been beneficial to Israel. One such protest occurred in New York's Central Park in October 2002 and followed with a full-page advertisement published in the *New York Times* by an anti-Zionist organisation called 'Not In Our Name'. This advertisement denounced Israeli policies and Zionism

17. *Challenging Christian Zionism*, 'Who We Are', at: [www.christianzionism.org](http://www.christianzionism.org) (accessed on 8 March 2005).

18. 'The 5th International Sabeel Conference Statement: Challenging Christian Zionism', at: [http://www.sabeel.nu/media/docs/konf2004/sabeel\\_5th-conf\\_statement.pdf](http://www.sabeel.nu/media/docs/konf2004/sabeel_5th-conf_statement.pdf) (accessed on 18 April 2004).

and was endorsed by several well-known Jews such as Susan Sarandon, Ed Asner, Gloria Steinem, and *Tikkun* leader Rabbi Michael Lerner. Christian Zionists responded with hostility to this position taken by American Jews with one particular Christian Zionist web site stating:

[On 11 October 2002] the Christian Coalition rallied for Israel and voiced its support for the Jewish state in front of the White House. There were speeches from American and Israeli political leaders, including the Reverend Pat Robertson, US House Majority Whip Tom DeLay, and [then] Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert.<sup>19</sup> Guess which of these events is setting off alarm bells for many mainstream liberal American Jews? You got it the latter one. Yes, the prospect of American Christians gathering in Washington to express their devotion to Israel and to demand that the administration do nothing to harm its interests is very scary to many Jews.<sup>20</sup>

It is not surprising that Christian Zionists would be offended by Jews who are ungrateful to their efforts, but the statement on the Christian Zionist web site specifically states, 'mainstream liberal American Jews'. Whether the author realises it, the vast majority of American Jews would fall into this classification. Most Jews are aware of the perceived fate that Christians hold for them, but their influence is too great to decline their assistance.

However, it is not only liberal mainstream Jews who have criticised the Christian Zionists but Ultra-Orthodox Jews as well. An organisation known as Neturei Karta, comprised of Ultra-Orthodox Jews, regularly protests against the practice of Zionism. The web site of Neturei Karta states that,

The Neturei Karta are fighting the changes and inroads made by political Zionism during the past one-hundred odd years. Guided by the rabbis of our time and under the inspiring leadership of the late Reb [Rabbi] Amram Blau, the Neturei Karta refuse to recognize the right of anyone to establish a "Jewish" state during the present period of exile.<sup>21</sup>

According to this organisation, the practice of Zionism is antithetical to the Torah and these Ultra-Orthodox rabbis insist that they have 'added nothing to, nor have they taken anything away from, the written and oral law of the Torah as it is expressed in the Halacha<sup>22</sup> and the Shulchan Aruch'.<sup>23</sup> The adherents to this doctrine believe that they are the true

19. Currently acting Israeli Prime Minister.

20. Jonathan S. Tobin, 'Is There Anything Dumber Than Repudiating Christians Who Support Israel', at: <http://christianactionforisrael.org/isreport/oct02/dumber.html> (accessed on 15 October 2002).

21. Neturei Karta, 'What is the Neturei Karta?', at: <http://www.nkusa.org/aboutus/index.cfm> (accessed on 5 February 2006).

22. Jewish religious law.

23. Neturei Karta, 'What is the Neturei Karta?', at: <http://www.nkusa.org/aboutus/index.cfm> (accessed on 5 February 2006).

followers of the Jewish faith, and Zionism is directly opposed to the law of Judaism because it promotes a Jewish state at a time when Jews are to remain in exile.

## **6. Apocalyptic Christian Zionism and US Middle East Policies**

Dispensationalism is not only popular among ordinary citizens; it has also achieved an unprecedented influence today because many of its followers hold high positions in government. James Watt, Secretary of the Interior in the Reagan Administration, was one of them. His expectation of the imminent 'rapture' became his rationale for exploiting natural resources with little thought of the future. Watt was thoroughly convinced that the 'rapture' was at hand. In Tony Campolo's words (2005),

[Watt saw no argument against] drilling for oil in national parks, eliminating environmental policies designed to protect the Earth's atmosphere, rivers, lakes, and oceans. [Watt believed that we should not] worry about the kind of planet that our grandchildren will inherit [because] the days for planet Earth [are] severely limited.

President Ronald Reagan embraced the dispensationalist theology preached to him by evangelists Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson (a Republican presidential candidate in 1988), and believed that one of his responsibilities was to promote a military buildup so America would be ready for the battle of Armageddon (Campolo 2005). According to Tom Valentine,<sup>24</sup> 'Charles Fischbein, a former high-ranking figure in the Israeli lobby in America, pointed out that even former President Reagan and his attorney general, Edwin Meese, were praying for Armageddon to come during the Reagan era. Reagan undoubtedly tied in with this idea that there has to be an Armageddon'. In an intimate phone conversation with AIPAC director Tom Dine, President Reagan was quoted as saying, 'You know, I turn back to your ancient prophets in the Old Testament and signs foretelling Armageddon, and I find myself wondering if - if we're the generation that's going to see that come about. I don't know if you've noted any of those prophecies lately, but believe me, they certainly describe the times we're going through' (Dugger 1984). These esoteric conversations give evidence that the policy actions taken by Reagan were consistent with the ideologies of dispensationalist theology and that Reagan applied this theology when making policy decisions.

Throughout George W. Bush's first term in office, leaders in the Christian Zionist community have been assured through specific incidents that the US administration will unequivocally support Israel throughout its

24. Tom Valentine, 'Dispensationalism Impacting US Foreign Policy', (Interview with Grace Halsell), *Spotlight*, 2 February 2000.

policy decisions. While the Bush Administration may dispute these claims, these commitments of support are derived from verbatim public statements made by Christian Zionist leaders who have met with President Bush, such as Jerry Falwell. During a *60 Minutes* interview in October 2002 Falwell commented, 'I think now we can count on President Bush to do the right thing for Israel every time',<sup>25</sup> referring to President Bush's actions in April 2002 when he turned a blind eye as Israel destroyed several West Bank cities. These statements by Falwell do not bode well for the US's credibility that it is taking the role of an honest broker in the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Christian Zionists have also been overt about their displeasure towards the US playing an even-handed role, or even purporting to, and want the US to abandon the idea of a Palestinian state and give Israel sole sovereignty over the Palestinian territories.

It was also during this interview that Falwell made inflammatory statements about Islam and the condition of the Palestinians. Following the interview, the National Council of Churches (NCC) called on President Bush to condemn the inflammatory and insensitive statements towards Islam that Falwell made in the *60 Minutes* interview. However, the White House did not respond to this request and President Bush did not comment on Falwell's statements.<sup>26</sup> Falwell has also stated, 'It is my belief that the Bible Belt in America is Israel's only safety belt right now/ There are 70 million of us [Evangelical Christians] / And if there's one thing that brings us together quickly it's whenever we begin to detect our government becoming a little anti-Israel'.<sup>27</sup> Falwell met with President Bush several times during his first term in office specifically to discuss the issue of US support of Israel. According to Falwell, the President's views on Israel are consistent with those of his own. As the NCC Resolution states: 'Falwell [has] implied in his comments that he and his constituency control President Bush's policies towards Israel and Palestine'.<sup>28</sup>

Several elected officials have chosen to be outspoken supporters of Israel based on their Christian faith. In some cases, this occurs despite the fact that their support for Israel is inconsistent with the views of their constituency. This is counter to the 'representative of the people' notion that we often assume in politics. This is the case of one of Israel's most outspoken

25. 'Bob Simon Interviews Jerry Falwell', *60 Minutes*, CBS (6 October 2002).

26. Resolution Refuting and Condemning the Statements concerning Islam and the Prophet Muhammed Made by Rev. Jerry Falwell on '*60 Minutes*', National Council of Churches, 7 October 2002.

27. 'Zion's Christian Soldiers', CBS Worldwide (updated 8 June 2003), <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/10/03/60minutes/main524268.shtml> (accessed on 4 March 2005).

28. Resolution Refuting and Condemning the Statements concerning Islam and the Prophet Muhammed Made by Rev. Jerry Falwell on '*60 Minutes*', National Council of Churches, 7 October 2002.



supporters in Washington D.C., Texas Republican Tom DeLay. According to the American Religion Data Archive (ARDA), a survey conducted in Brazoria County, located in the 22nd Congressional District of Texas, more citizens in this district identify themselves as mainline Protestants or Catholics than Evangelical Christians. However, studies by Paul Charles Merkley (2001) have revealed that the hierarchies of the Catholic and Protestant churches have been vocal opponents of Zionism in the Christian realm. They have issued countless warnings against Zionism to their followers through their global organisations such as the World Council of Churches (WCC), and have concluded that Christian Zionism and dispensationalism are biblically erroneous.

### *6.1 The Impact of Christian Zionism on US Policies*

A first example that substantiates the profound impact Christian Zionists have on US policy is the infamous Israeli incursions into the West Bank in April 2002. According to Wagner, these incursions are considered one of the 'decisive moment[s] in the forging of this [contemporary] alliance' (Wagner 2003). This contemporary alliance refers to the close relationship between Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and George W. Bush's first-term administration. Following a Palestinian suicide attack at a Seder dinner in Israel, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) invaded several West Bank cities and proceeded to obliterate entire neighborhoods of Palestinian cities and towns under the pretext of rooting out terror.<sup>29</sup> International outcries would become deafening at this time, and most were directed at President Bush and his administration, which the international community viewed as the only influence that could halt this destruction. Responding to international pressure, President Bush made several appeals to Israeli Prime Minister Sharon to cease the Israeli actions. While Sharon's response of Israeli self-defense was expected, the response from the American Christian-Right in the face of these humanitarian crimes would be most disheartening. As Wagner wrote (2003):

The Pro-Israel lobby, in coordination with the Christian-Right, mobilized over 100,000 e-mail messages, calls and visits urging the President to avoid restraining Israel. The tactic worked. The president uttered not another word of criticism or caution, and Sharon continued the offensive.

Such an occurrence further corroborates the influence of Christian Zionism and its blind support of Israel in the name of faith. From mere observation, a visit to Christian Zionist web sites followed by a visit to far right-leaning Israeli web sites reveals a remarkable discovery: rhetoric, links to other columns, accusations, and praises are nearly identical from

29. This attack occurred at a Seder dinner in Israel when a suicide bomber detonated explosives on 27 March 2002, killing 29.

both parties.<sup>30</sup>

A second example of the influence of Christian Zionists in US politics was Congressman Jim Moran's March 2003 resignation from his position of House Democratic regional whip. In the early weeks of the US-led invasion of Iraq, Moran suggested that in the interest of Israel, the Jewish lobby promoted the US-led invasion of Iraq.<sup>31</sup> After Moran's statement, there was an immediate condemnation by Jewish organisations and the State of Israel. These groups also called for Moran's resignation. The Jewish backlash was anticipated and Moran did not initially back off from his comments, nor did he have any intention of resigning from his post. However, in the ensuing days the Christian Zionist leadership followed suit with rhetoric similar to that of the Jewish organisations, and Moran soon became ostracised from his party. Reverend Dr Paul Schenck, a Christian Zionist, suggested that Moran's statement was a gesture that was out of 'hatred for the Jewish people / by those who harbor animosity to the apple of God's eye'.<sup>32</sup> Due to the strong Christian Zionist backlash following his statements, Moran would suffer a loss of confidence from his party, which resulted in his resignation as regional whip.

Incidents such as this demonstrate that the Christian Zionist lobby has established a pervasive influence in Washington. As former State Department Deputy Director of Counter Terrorism Terrell Arnold states (2004), 'Congressional hardening on the side of Israel is driven in part by anger about the Palestinian suicide bombings, but the main drivers are active lobbies for Israel, including Jewish organizations in the United States and the Christian-Right'.<sup>33</sup>

A third example relates to the US's endorsement of the Roadmap. In Spring of 2003, President Bush stated his commitment to establishing progress towards peace in the Israeli-Palestinian crisis through the Middle East Quartet-sponsored Roadmap. President Bush also pledged to establish a democratic Palestinian state existing side-by-side in harmony with Israel. President Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Sharon publicly stated their vehement opposition to a peace process progressing under President Yasser Arafat's leadership.<sup>34</sup> Under heavy international pressure the Palestinian

30. Based on visits to the web sites of four self-proclaimed Christian Zionist organisations (American Values, Christians for Israel, Stand for Israel, WorldNet Daily) followed by visits to the web sites of four right-leaning Israeli organisations (ADL, AIPAC, Ayn Rand Institute, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs) (accessed on 10 June 2004).

31. Joel Benin, 'Pro-Israel Hawks and the Second Gulf War', *Middle East Report Online*. Updated on 6 April 2003, at: <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero040603.html> (accessed on 5 August 2003).

32. Paul Schenck, 'Moran Levies Blood Libel against Jews', at: <http://www.faithandaction.org/Moran.htm> (accessed on 12 March 2003).

33. Terrell E Arnold, 'Israel: The Delusion of Support', at: <http://www.rense.com/general24/isre.htm> (accessed on 23 April 2002).

34. Arafat died on 11 November 2004.

Authority appointed Mahmoud Abbas as the first Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority. With Arafat under an Israeli-imposed house arrest, the appointment gave Abbas de facto control over the political progress of Palestine. In June 2003 the US acted as a third-party mediator at a meeting between Sharon and Abbas in Aqaba, Jordan. The meeting was a hurried attempt to initiate the peace process and was largely symbolic with no tangible gain. However, when President Bush affirmed his commitment to the Roadmap shortly after the Aqaba meeting, a Christian Zionist organisation, known as the Apostolic Congress, mobilised its constituents to send a message to President Bush:

[The] Apostolic Congress co-sponsored an effort with the Jewish group Americans for a Safe Israel that placed billboards in 23 cities with a quotation from Genesis, 'Unto thy offspring will I give this land' and the message, 'Pray that President Bush Honors God's Covenant with Israel. Call the White House with this message.' It then provided the White House phone number and the Apostolic Congress's Web address. In the interview with the Voice, Pastor Upton claimed personal responsibility for directing 50,000 postcards to the White House opposing the Road Map, which aims to create a Palestinian state. 'I'm in total disagreement with any form of Palestinian state', Upton said. 'Within a two-week period, getting 50,000 postcards saying the exact same thing from places all over the country; that resonated with the White House, that really caused [President Bush] to backpedal on the Road Map.'<sup>35</sup>

After receiving these 50,000 postcards and letters, the administration began to rethink the timing of its Roadmap endorsement. It is alleged that the Christian-Right's deep aversion to the Roadmap worried President Bush's closest advisors and the administration preferred not to apply any further pressure to the peace process until after the 2004 Presidential elections.

A fourth example focuses on the US's excusal of Israel's aerial assassinations of Palestinian faction leaders. In June 2003, the Israeli Air Force attempted to assassinate Hamas leader Dr 'AbdelAziz Rantisi. In this botched helicopter raid the Israelis killed six people, but Rantisi escaped with non-life-threatening injuries. President Bush initially condemned the attempted assassination stating that the attack made fighting terrorism more difficult for the newly-appointed Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas.<sup>36</sup> Following this condemnation, the Christian Zionist leadership in the US mobilised their constituents to send thousands of e-mails to the White House protesting the criticism. Notably, these emails consistently featured the threat that if reprimands towards Israel continue, the Christian-Right voting bloc will not appear on election-day. It is said that within 24 hours

35. Rick Perlstein 'In Line for the Rapture', *Village Voice*, at: <http://www.alternet.org/story/18780> (accessed on 25 May 2004).

36. 'Israel Unapologetic About Gaza Attacks', *The Guardian*, 11 June 2003.

the President's tone towards the attack had changed, and in March 2004 when Israel assassinated Hamas' spiritual leader Shaykh Ahmad Yassin, the US largely defended the action.<sup>37</sup> It was clear that the Bush administration had not forgotten the warnings received from its Christian Zionist constituents only nine months prior. Without a negative response from the US, Israel became more aggressive, and the following month Dr Rantisi was assassinated. The US once again defended Israel's use of force under the pretext of fighting terror. Thus, the Christian Zionist lobby had successfully cleared the way for Israel to commit targeted assassinations on the leaders of the Palestinian movements.

### Conclusions

The tragic irony of this alliance lies in the diametrically opposed sentiment of Christian Zionists and the remainder of the world. While much of the world shamefully watched as Palestinians suffered through the collective punishment of incursions and devastation, Christian Zionists benightedly supported Israeli military action and used their influence to extend it. It is apparent that through the influence of the Christian Zionist lobby, Israeli objectives can be achieved despite international law and outcry. Despite studies and reports that have shown that a majority of Israeli citizens would prefer disengaging from West Bank settlements in exchange for peace, Christian Zionists are among the most fanatical advocates for the proliferation of settlements in the West Bank and increased violence against Palestinians. However, Christian Zionism is deaf to the desires of the people which its influence impacts, and does not advocate measures of peace, but rather it seeks the justification of all Israeli action under any pretense and by any means necessary. The evidence presented in this article reveals that while the Christian Zionist lobby is thriving in its mission of advancing hawkish Israeli interests, it is, in actuality, counterproductive to Israel as it is detrimental to the prospect of peace. This policy of violence and suffocation towards Palestinians produces a dangerous byproduct, which will become evident years from now. It breeds a new generation of hate among Israelis and Palestinians because it exacerbates the already dire humanitarian conditions in the Occupied Territories, which result in the escalation of violence towards Israeli and Palestinian civilians.

As Christian Zionists cling on to this notion of a 'chosen people', the results of this entwined relationship spell disaster for Palestinians who have become the forgotten victims of this alliance. However, the greater motivation behind Christian Zionists' undying support is the satisfaction of their

37. Stephen Zunes, 'US Defense of Israeli Assassinations Is Counterproductive', at: <http://www.antiwar.com/orig/zunes.php?articleid=2255> (accessed on 6 April 2004).

theological outline. While Christian Zionists support Israel monetarily and through influence, they have simultaneously indoctrinated a notion among American Christians that we are on the brink of the 'end-times', and God will soon exterminate two-thirds of his chosen people. This belief is inherently anti-Semitic and the actions of the Christian Zionist movement are being carried out with the intent of successfully attaining their theological prophecy, one that spells disaster for the Jewish people. As the US works for what it states is an 'evenhanded' approach to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the influence of the Christian Zionist 'Armageddon Lobby' is actually ever greater in shaping the US's 'honest broker' policy.

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