

Iran: The religious right's new bugbear

by *Bill Berkowitz*

Are conservative Christian evangelicals gearing up to join the attack-Iran brigade?

As the launching of the Iraq War marked its fourth anniversary on March 19, it is worth remembering that during the lead up to the invasion a number of conservative evangelicals voiced their support for the war: Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission for the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest Protestant denomination, maintained that Bush's action met criteria for a just war; the National Association of Evangelicals, which represents several dozen denominations encompassing more than 30 million American evangelical Christians, openly supported the war; Mike Evans, who heads the aggressively pro-Israeli Jerusalem Prayer Team, pointed out that war with Iraq could be a "dress rehearsal for Armageddon," the fulfillment of Biblical Prophecy.

These days, while the Bush Administration and beltway neoconservatives doggedly crank up the volume against Iran, they are again being joined by several notable conservative Christian evangelical leaders.

Hagee Leading the Charge

Pastor John Hagee On Sunday March 11, Pastor John Hagee, the founder of Christians United for Israel, received a rousing reception during his address at the opening dinner plenary of the annual American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference.

Hagee warned the crowd that "Iran poses a nuclear threat to the State of Israel that promises nothing less than a nuclear Holocaust." Hagee claimed that the situation is like 1938, only "Iran is Germany and [President Mahmoud] Ahmedinejad is the new Hitler."

Hagee added: "We must stop Iran's nuclear threat and stop it now and stand boldly [with] Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East."

A few weeks earlier, Hagee met with Senator John McCain, a leading contender for the Republican Party's 2008 presidential nomination. Hagee has been leading the charge of conservative Christian evangelicals urging President Bush to deal more robustly with Iran.

"Hagee's appearance at AIPAC indicates the growing organizational strength of the Christian Zionist lobby for apocalyptic war and the rise of corresponding Jewish factions both within AIPAC and within Israeli

politics that are pushing for dramatically expanded war in the Mideast," Bruce Wilson, the co-founder of Talk To Action, told me in an e-mail interview.

John Hagee, the pastor of the 18,000-member San Antonio, Texas-based Cornerstone Church and the head of a multi-million dollar evangelical enterprise, "seems to believe such a conflict is both inevitable and necessary," The Jewish Week noted in early March.

Hagee, who founded Christians United for Israel (CUFI), a Christian Zionist lobbying group last year, is the author of a number of Christian-themed novels, as well as the recent "Jerusalem Countdown: A Warning to the World," which maintains that biblical prophecy is currently playing itself out in the Middle East.

"The end of the world as we know it is rapidly approaching," Hagee wrote in "Jerusalem Countdown." "Just before us is a nuclear countdown with Iran followed by Ezekiel's war (as described in Ezekiel, chapters 38 and 39), and then the final battle -- the battle of Armageddon."

In a recent series of articles focused on Hagee, Talk to Action's Bruce Wilson described him as someone that "has built a career on aggressive support for hard right to fringe right Israeli politics and is now making inroads towards convincing the mainstream American Jewish community that he and CUFI are the best tactical allies Jews and Israel can expect to find."

"Pastor John Hagee's warmly received AIPAC speech illustrates the extent to which political leaders who espouse ideology that in the 1960's was considered to be scandalously close the extreme end of the political spectrum can now expect to broadcast their views from a national stage," Wilson told me.

Recruiting Evangelical Allies for a Showdown Against Iran

Joel Rosenberg is another conservative Christian evangelical advocating some type of Bush Administration action against Iran. In late February, Rosenberg, who was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family, reported on his website that a number of conservative Christian evangelical leaders were beginning to show an interest in Iran, particularly as the situation in the Middle East relates to passages in the Bible.

Rosenberg's latest novel, "The Ezekiel Option," is "about the threat of a Russian-Iranian alliance to destroy Israel based on the Biblical prophecies found in the Book of Ezekiel, chapters 38 and 39." These prophecies "describe what Bible scholars call the war of Gog and Magog. Russia and Iran form a military alliance with Lebanon, Syria and a group of other Middle East countries to destroy Israel in what Ezekiel described as the last days."

In January, during a trip to the Middle East, Rosenberg said that he "brief[ed] several hundred Arab and Iranian pastors and evangelical leaders on the latest geopolitical developments in the region," and that he taught "on Ezekiel 38 and 39 ... prophecies that most Christian leaders in the region are unfamiliar with."

Back home, Rosenberg has discovered a growing interest in developments in Iran amongst evangelical Christian leaders. While flying to New Mexico he "happened to sit next to" Focus on the Family founder Dr. James Dobson, one of the most politically powerful conservative evangelical leaders in the U.S. Dobson, who "had been in Washington for meetings with high level administration officials to discuss Iran, Iraq and the latest developments in the Middle East," told Rosenberg that he was becoming more "concerned about the Iranian nuclear threat, and has been studying Ezekiel's prophecies."

Rosenberg also reported that Kay Arthur, a "world renowned Bible teacher," had also developed an interest in "the military alliance ... between Russia and Iran and how this might relate to Ezekiel's prophecies." Arthur recently invited Rosenberg to her headquarters in Chattanooga, Tennessee, "to teach on the Biblical description of the 'War of Gog and Magog' and to record a series of radio and TV programs to explain these prophecies in light of current events."

He also "spent several days with a team of Iranian Christian pastors" that "have a satellite television ministry which is seen by between 4 and 7 million Iranian Shiites every day." Rosenberg discussed "Bible prophecies about Iran with them and help[ed] them develop a plan to communicate 'God's love and plan for Iran' through their live satellite broadcasts, as well as figure out how to answer the many phone calls and emails they are sure to get from inside Iran once such programs are broadcast into the country."

According to Rosenberg, the Iranian Christian pastors "see a showdown with Iran coming, and they feel passionately about reaching their fellow Iranians with the good news of Christ's love."

"Will there be a war in the region this year or next?" While acknowledging that "it's too it's too early to say," Rosenberg claimed that 2007 is "the Year of Decision." President Bush and Congressional leaders "will need to decide soon just how they're going to handle the Iranian nuclear threat," [and] Church leaders also need to decide just how they are going to handle the Iranian threat, as well ... after all, time is short, and the stakes are high."

Last July, at Christian United For Israel's coming out party in Washington, D.C., John Hagee stated that "The United States must join Israel in a pre-emptive military strike against Iran to fulfill God's plan for both Israel and the West ... a biblically prophesied end-time confrontation with Iran, which will lead to the Rapture, Tribulation ... and [the] Second Coming of Christ."

During a September 18, 2006 interview with WHYY's Terry Gross, Hagee talked about the Russian/Iranian alliance that for the past ten years has been "plot[ing] and plan[ning] Israel's destruction." Hagee charged that "Iran's nuclear weapons have been produced with Russian scientists. The Islamic Arabs are using the Roadmap to Peace to get all of the land of Israel they can get. And when Israel finally says, 'Enough!' you're going to see the beginning of the implementation of Ezekiel's war in 38:39. The critical point is the church is raptured before this war begins. I am telling you that makes this message one of the most thrilling prophetic messages you've ever heard in your life. You could get raptured out of this building before I get through finished preaching. We are that close to the coming of the Son of Man."

In a statement Jane Hunter and Rabbi Haim Dov Beliak, co-founders of the website JewsOnFirst.org, said that "Hagee's call in his speech for victory for Israel and America (which appears to refer to Iran) is not necessarily the call for military victory which his audience might have heard (a chilling prospect nonetheless). Hagee's "victory" is coded language for Armageddon, which Christian Zionists see as the end-times battles set in Israel, when Christians are raptured to heaven and Jews lose -- unless they're happy to convert."

If President Bush unleashes a pre-emptive military strike against Iran, there is little doubt that Pastor Hagee and Joel Rosenberg will be standing behind him.

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