

Christian Right Steps Up Pro-Israel Lobbying

by *Bill Berkowitz*

Over the past two decades, as the Christian Right has grown in political power in the United States, there has been a parallel growth in support for Israel. Organizations made up of conservative evangelical and Jewish leaders have been founded, and millions of dollars have been raised and donated to charities in Israel.

Now, a new group plans to take it up a notch, becoming a significant presence in any political policy debates involving Israel.

Last week, while the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict continued to escalate, Christians United for Israel (CUFI) — an organization founded less than six months ago by Texas evangelist Rev. John C. Hagee, pastor of the 18,000-member Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, and the author of "Jerusalem Countdown," a 2006 book about a nuclear-armed Iran — rolled into Washington for its first major get-together.

More than 3,400 delegates from across the United States attended the inaugural meeting.

CUFI kicked off the gathering on July 19 with its "A Night to Honor Israel" banquet at the grand ballroom in the Washington Hilton. The festivities attracted a number of high-profile Israeli and U.S. political leaders, including Israeli Ambassador Daniel Ayalon, retired Israeli defense chief Lt. Gen. Moshe Yaalon, and Republican National Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman.

According to a report posted at Israpundit, Hagee read greetings from President George W. Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Bush commented: "God bless and stand by the people of Israel and God bless the United States."

Olmert's letter referred to CUFI's "'bold stand at this crisis time,' and the group's acknowledgment of Israel's biblical 'birthright.'"

The following day, at a well-attended press conference, Hagee said that "The dots are there to be connected, and it is not some big thing called terrorism. It is Islamic fascism — all of the various things and forces that we've seen around the world are not merely hot spots but they are all part of a theme — a war against Western civilization."

The news conference was followed by a trip to Capitol Hill to lobby congressional representatives.

While other organizations have mostly talked the talk, Hagee's CUFI has set out a bold agenda and it appears to have the resources and political connections to walk the walk: CUFI intends to not only establish a visible presence in hundreds of cities throughout all 50 states, but it also intends to recruit activists to lobby on behalf of Israel.

In addition, CUFI plans to set up an "Israel Rapid Response" network which through e-mail, faxes, and phone calls will make its voice heard by elected officials.

To move CUFI's agenda from the planning stage to direct action, Hagee brought David Brog, a Washington insider, on board as the organization's executive director. The hiring of Brog, who is Jewish, the former chief of staff for Pennsylvania Republican Sen. Arlen Specter and the author of the recently published book "Standing With Israel: Why Christians Support the Jewish State," was a shrewd and politically savvy move.

In a recent interview, Brog noted that he had "admired" Hagee "from afar," and he explained why, as a Conservative Jew, he would work for a Christian organization: "I believe this is the most important thing I could do not only for Israel but for Judeo-Christian civilization today, which is under threat from radical Islam."

In the preface to his book, Brog establishes his credentials by maintaining that he is "not a Messianic Jew or a Jew for Jesus" and that he doesn't "believe that the Messiah has ever appeared on Earth." He writes that he "embrace[s]" his "Jewish faith and seek[s] knowledge of my Creator through the paths and texts provided to me by my Jewish ancestors." He also points out that while he doesn't "observe all of the Halacha [Jewish law], [he does] recognize the Halacha as a central component of my religion."

While many in the Jewish community have certainly appreciated the support evangelical Christians have given Israel, many Jews still have deep reservations about the Christian evangelicals' mission to convert Jews to Christianity, and their adherence to End-Times beliefs that essentially leave Jews behind.

In a press release issued by the Institute for Public Accuracy, the Rev. Dr. Donald Wagner, a professor at North Park University in Chicago and a founding member of the Institute for the Study of Christian Zionism, pointed out that Christian Zionists see "the modern state of the country-region Israel as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy and thus deserving of political, financial, and religious support."

Referring to the current Israeli-Hezbollah conflict, Wagner added that "Many of the Christian Zionists may interpret this as a prelude to the battle of Armageddon and the final end-times scenario."

In a late-May interview with the American Thinker's Ed Lasky, Brog stated that "Christians who support Israel do not expect any kind of quid pro quo from the Jewish community. Evangelical support for Israel is a genuine expression of Christian love for the Jews and respect for God's promises to them, and it comes with no strings attached."

"That being said, it is important to note that Christians are human beings with normal human emotions. When they spend a great deal of time supporting Israel and fighting anti-Semitism, they are disappointed when these efforts are ignored by the Jewish community, and when the only time they hear from representatives of the Jewish community is to attack them because of their positions on social issues."

"This cold reception doesn't sway evangelicals from their course of support for Israel. But it does cause a certain disappointment, a certain feeling of rejection, that I think is unfortunate. We in the Jewish community should try to express greater appreciation for what our Christian friends are doing on our behalf."

In the preface to his book " written before becoming CUFI executive director " Brog gives Christian Zionists his stamp of approval, stating that he was "convinced that the evangelical Christians who support Israel today are nothing less than the theological heirs of the righteous Gentiles who sought to save Jews from the Holocaust."

CUFI has drawn its share of criticism as well. In a recent commentary, ultraconservative pundit Pat Buchanan wrote, "One wonders if these Christians care about what is happening to our Christian brethren in Lebanon and Gaza, who have had all power cut off by Israeli air strikes, an outlawed form of collective punishment that has left them with no sanitation, rotting food, impure water, and days without light or electricity in the horrible heat of July."

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