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**For Evangelicals, Supporting Israel Is ‘God’s Foreign Policy’**

By **DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK**

WASHINGTON, Nov. 13 — As Israeli bombs fell on [Lebanon](#) for a second week last July, the Rev. John Hagee of San Antonio arrived in Washington with 3,500 evangelicals for the first annual conference of his newly founded organization, Christians United For [Israel](#).

At a dinner addressed by the Israeli ambassador, a handful of Republican senators and the chairman of the [Republican Party](#), Mr. Hagee read greetings from President Bush and Prime Minister [Ehud Olmert](#) of Israel and dispatched the crowd with a message for their representatives in Congress. Tell them “to let Israel do their job” of destroying the Lebanese militia, [Hezbollah](#), Mr. Hagee said.

He called the conflict “a battle between good and evil” and said support for Israel was “God’s foreign policy.”

The next day he took the same message to the White House.

Many conservative Christians say they believe that the president’s support for Israel fulfills a biblical injunction to protect the Jewish state, which some of them think will play a pivotal role in the second coming. Many on the left, in turn, fear that such theology may influence decisions the administration makes toward Israel and the Middle East.

Administration officials say that the meeting with Mr. Hagee was a courtesy for a political ally and that evangelical theology has no effect on policy making. But the alliance of Israel, its evangelical Christian supporters and President Bush has never been closer or more potent. In the wake of the summer war in southern Lebanon, reports that Hezbollah’s sponsor, Iran, may be pushing for nuclear weapons have galvanized conservative Christian support for Israel into a political force that will be hard to ignore.

For one thing, white evangelicals make up about a quarter of the electorate. Whatever strains may be creeping into the Israeli-American alliance over Iraq, the Palestinians and Iran, a large part of the Republican Party's base remains committed to a fiercely pro-Israel agenda that seems likely to have an effect on policy choices.

Mr. Hagee says his message for the White House was, "Every time there has been a fight like this over the last 50 years, the State Department would send someone over in a jet to call for a cease-fire. The terrorists would rest, rearm and retaliate." He added, "Appeasement has never helped the Jewish people."

This time Elliott Abrams, the White House deputy national security adviser who met with him, essentially agreed, Mr. Hagee said.

Leaving the White House offices, "we felt we were on the right track," he said.

Now, in tandem with the Israeli government, many evangelical Christians have focused on a new villain, Iran's president, [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#). Evangelical broadcasters and commentators have seized on Mr. Ahmadinejad's comments questioning the Holocaust and calling for the abolition of the Israeli state. And many evangelicals now talk of the Iranian leader as a "mortal threat" to Israel.

Some evangelical leaders say they are wary of reports that a panel including former Secretary of State [James A. Baker III](#) might recommend negotiating with Iran about the future of Iraq. "It certainly bothers me," said Dr. James C. Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family and one of the most influential conservative Christians. "That has the same kind of feel to it as the British negotiating with Germany, Italy and Japan in the run up to World War II."

At rallies this fall for Christian conservative voters, Dr. Dobson sometimes singled out Mr. Ahmadinejad as a reason to go to the polls, arguing that [Democrats](#) could not be trusted to face

down such dangers. "[Hitler](#) told everybody what he was going to do, and Ahmadinejad is saying exactly what he is going to do," Dr. Dobson explained. "He is talking genocide."

The same name, with many pronunciations, comes up repeatedly on Christian talk radio shows, said Gary Bauer, a Christian conservative political organizer. "I am not sure there is a foreign leader who has made a bigger splash in American culture since Khrushchev, certainly among committed Christians," he said.

Mr. Hagee, for his part, said Mr. Ahmadinejad's comments about Israel and the Holocaust were part of what motivated him to found Christians United For Israel late last year. Since the fight with Hezbollah, Mr. Hagee said, he is doing all he can to keep the pressure on [United States](#) officials to take a hard line with Iran.

When 5,000 evangelicals gathered last month for a "Night to Honor Israel" at his San Antonio megachurch, for example, Mr. Ahmadinejad was much discussed.

Mr. Hagee compared the Iranian leader with the biblical pharaoh of Egypt. "Pharaoh threatened Israel and he ended up fish food," Mr. Hagee said, to great applause.

Evangelical Christians who know President Bush, including Marvin Olasky, editor of the magazine *World* and a former Bush adviser, said Mr. Bush, unlike [President Reagan](#), has never shown any interest in prophecies of the second coming.

Such theological details, however, have not kept the Israeli government and Jewish pro-Israel lobbying groups from capitalizing on the powerful support of American evangelicals. Fearing a backlash over Lebanon last July, Israeli officials and their American allies sought public statements of support from American evangelicals. Some groups declined because of risks to missionaries in the Arab world.

Dr. Dobson read a statement on his popular radio program expressing “heartache” at the civilian casualties but comparing Israel’s fight to “the Biblical skirmish between little David and mighty Goliath.” He explained, “There sits little Israel with its five million beleaguered Jews, surrounded by five hundred million Muslims whose leaders are determined to drive it into the sea.”

Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, the founder of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews and the Israeli government’s official goodwill ambassador to evangelicals, said the statements turned out to be superfluous because there was a groundswell of grass roots evangelical support.

Mr. Eckstein said he had discovered the depth of that support when he ran television commercials on the Fox News Channel seeking donations. The response, mainly from evangelicals, “burned out the call centers,” Mr. Eckstein said. During the five-week war, his group added 30,000 new donors. Thanks to the influx of money, he said his organization has exceeded its income from the first 10 months of last year by 60 percent, putting it on track to pull in \$80 million this year. “The war really generated a momentum,” Mr. Eckstein said.

Evangelicals’ support for Israel, of course, is far from uniform. Mr. Hagee is an author of several books about the interpretation of biblical prophecies. He says he believes the Bible assigns Israel a pivotal role as a harbinger of the second coming. Citing passages from Revelation and Ezekiel, he argues that conflict between Israel and Iran may be a sign that that time is approaching.

Others say they believe more generally that God maintains his Old Testament covenant with the Jewish people and thus commands Christian believers to help protect their “older brothers.”

“My theology indicates that Israel is covenant land,” Dr. Dobson said in an interview.

Many conservative Christians and their Jewish allies acknowledge a certain tension between the evangelical belief in a Biblical commission to convert non-Christians and their simultaneous desire to help the Jews of Israel.

“Despite all the spiritual shortcomings of the Jewish people,” Dr. Dobson said, “according to scripture — and those criticisms come not from Christians but from the Old Testament. Just look in Deuteronomy, where Jews are referred to as a stiff-necked and stubborn people — despite all of that, God has chosen to bless them as his people. God chose to bless Abraham and his seed not because they were a perfect people any more than the rest of the human family.”

Dr. Dobson, along with some other evangelicals, has expressed disappointment with what he saw as the Bush administration’s pressure on Israel to sign the cease-fire that ended the fight.

“They began by saying they had to take a hard line, by saying they would support Israel and they ended up urging them to compromise and go home,” Dr. Dobson said. “All that is going to do is allow everybody to reload. That didn’t solve anything.” (Mr. Hagee said that he believed the administration gave Israel “ample time” but that Israel erred by not “unleashing the full might of its ground troops” until it was too late.)

The Israeli government and its American allies have been building their alliance with evangelicals for decades. Israeli officials began working closely with Mr. Hagee and his church, for example, a quarter century ago, when he met several times with then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin.

The Jerusalem Post, an English-language newspaper, recently started an edition for American Christians.

The Israeli government temporarily cut off ties with the Christian broadcaster [Pat Robertson](#) after he suggested that Prime Minister [Ariel Sharon](#)’s stroke might have been God’s punishment

for withdrawing from territory that belonged to the Biblical Israel. But then Mr. Robertson flew to Israel during the fight with Hezbollah. In a gesture of reconciliation, the Israeli government recently worked with him to film a television commercial to attract Christian tourists.

“Israel — to walk where Jesus walked, to pray where Jesus prayed, to stand where he stood — there is no other place like it on earth,” Mr. Robertson says in the commercial, according to the Jerusalem Post.

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