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The World: Crossing Jordan; The Exit That Isn't On Bush's 'Road Map'

By JAMES BENNET

THE Bush administration argues that the defeat of Saddam Hussein has provided a chance to end the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, and that only the eventual creation of a Palestinian state can accomplish that.

Benjamin Elon, a minister in the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon, agrees. But, reviving a vision long cherished by Israel's religious and secular hawks, he argues that the new Palestinian state must be Jordan.

This is the "window of opportunity," he says, for Israel to annex at last the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. If the Bush administration has the courage to abandon "clichés" about land for peace, he argues, it can now achieve a "long-term, spiritual earthquake" in the Middle East.

Mr. Elon's vision has new punch because of the strengthening alliance between those Jews who favor a Greater Israel and conservative Christians in the United States who are moved by the same ancient dream, based on what evangelicals call the "Abrahamic covenant."

And Israeli politicians, including Prime Minister Sharon, are well aware of that alliance as they consider their response to President Bush's new drive for peace. In fact, the religious nationalism that Mr. Elon embraces so tightly appears to be gaining adherents faster in the United States than in Israel.

Mr. Elon's view evokes basic questions of the meaning of the Jewish state. It makes explicit what some believers of many creeds -- though not the Bush administration -- say is the real subtext of the war on terrorism: that it is a battle between Judeo-Christian and Islamic values, beliefs and territorial ambitions.

Referring to Palestinians, Mr. Elon said, "We can force them to understand it -- and they will understand it -- that we are the children of Israel that came back to the land of Israel."

Prime Minister Sharon rebuked Mr. Elon for pushing his plan in Washington while the Israeli government was officially reviewing the approach Mr. Bush backs. Yet Mr. Sharon, who is to meet with President Bush this week, invited along a minister allied with Mr. Elon, as well as other members of his government, when he met with Secretary of State Colin L. Powell last Sunday.

Mr. Sharon's goal, one of his advisers said, was to demonstrate to Mr. Powell how much resistance he will face if he follows the "road map" favored in Washington, a plan that envisions

a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza in just three years. Mr. Sharon has serious objections to that plan and wants to change it.

Mr. Bush, on the other hand, has endorsed the road map. But if the president demands that Israel immediately begin to carry it out, as Palestinians have asked, he is almost certain to face objections from a key constituency, Christian conservatives.

"You're much more likely to hear a person from the Christian right say that all of Israel belongs to the Jews than many Israeli politicians, including on the Israeli right," said Gershom Gorenberg, author of "The End of Days: Fundamentalism and the Struggle for the Temple Mount." "Congress is full of people who reflect this kind of thinking."

Jordan rejects Mr. Elon's plan, and the Bush administration appears chilly to it.

As Israel's minister of tourism, Mr. Elon, an eloquent, cheerful exponent of his cause, went to the United States this month to drum up visitors and to promote his ideas among congressmen and devout Christians -- two groups that, not coincidentally, supply some of the hardest tourists here.

On his trip, Mr. Elon met with Tom DeLay, the House majority leader, who has referred to the West Bank by the Biblical names of Judea and Samaria.

He also met with Gary L. Bauer, the president of American Values, a conservative research group. Mr. Bauer, a critic of the road map, said he was impressed by what he heard. "If the West Bank is a Palestinian state, the security issues that would be raised for the people of Israel seem to me to be massive," he said in a telephone interview. He said the views of theologically conservative Christians like himself were diverse, but that they generally accepted the Abrahamic Covenant -- the promise, as described in Genesis, by which God deeded the ancient land of Israel to the Hebrew descendants of Abraham.

"For conservative Christians, the West Bank is Judea and Samaria, and that is considered in their minds -- in my mind -- to be part of the land of Israel," he said, while emphasizing he did not support "the forcible movement of Palestinians."

Mr. Elon has formed ties to other Christian leaders, including Pat Robertson. In October, he addressed the annual convention of the Christian Coalition. According to The Forward, a weekly focused on American Jewish life, he was cheered by thousands of evangelical Christians waving Israeli flags when he called for the "relocation" of Palestinians to Jordan. Mr. Elon says he envisions a voluntary transfer.

For Palestinians, Mr. Elon's message amounts to incitement. "Imagine a country that said, 'These Jews aren't really happy here, and we're going to give them rights in another country,'" said Michael Tarazi, a legal adviser to the Palestine Liberation Organization. "The entire world would rightfully see that as anti-Semitic. And there would be, correctly, public outcry."

In 1989, in his autobiography, "Warrior," Mr. Sharon argued that Jordan was the Palestinian state. He said then that Palestinians in the West Bank should be granted political rights in Jordan, while living under Israeli security control among Israeli Jews.

Mr. Elon adds that Israel should deport "terrorists and their direct supporters" and dismantle refugee camps, settling refugees abroad in Arab nations. Palestinians call this forced transfer, or ethnic cleansing. Mr. Elon calls it "the completion of the exchange of populations that began in 1948."

Mr. Sharon's own ministers are divided over what to make of his strategy. Some think he wants the right-wingers to bind his hands, to provide him cover with Washington to resist or even kill the peace plan; others say he is slowly leading his government to accept it.

Mr. Sharon tends to take the long view. In 1970, when Syria invaded Jordan to protect the P.L.O., which was battling the government of King Hussein, he was one of the few Israeli officers who argued Israel had an interest in seeing Jordan become a Palestinian state. That, in his view, would turn the debate over a Palestinian identity and homeland into just another border dispute, with the Jordan River a clean, defensible boundary.

Yet Mr. Sharon says he comes from a line of "pragmatic Zionists," and his focus has always been the security of Jews today, rather than the letter of the Bible. "I don't think we can continue to control another people," he told The Jerusalem Post last week.

LIKE most Israelis, Mr. Sharon has accepted the basic formula of land for peace, provided he approves of the Palestinian leadership. But a central question is how much land he is willing to part with, and how soon. Last week, he made clear that, despite the road map's call for a settlement freeze, he did not plan short-term action against settlement activity.

His advisers say he envisions a demilitarized state in less than half the West Bank, interrupted by settlement blocks, that would come into existence after many years of an interim solution.

In one of the curious symmetries of the conflict, Mr. Elon criticizes that vision of a truncated Palestinian state west of the Jordan in much the same terms that Palestinians do. "It will be some kind of state for slaves," he said.

Mr. Elon, a rabbi, said Jews had erred by emphasizing security concerns, rather than their Biblical roots in the land, when they began arguing for their right to retain settlements in the West Bank. "You can't understand the Middle East if you don't understand the Prophets," he said.

The Bible, he says, is where Christians and Jews meet; their debate begins only with the New Testament.

They may agree with religious Jews about the Biblical past, but many evangelical Christians have a highly particular notion of what Jewish control of this land will mean for the future; for them, it will help usher in the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Mr. Elon prefers to dwell on goals he views as common to both religions. "The Christians with the leadership of Bush, and the Jews with the existence of the state of Israel, have a window of opportunity to make clear to the Islamic world that we have power, and we are here -- not because of the power, but because of the right," he said. "That's something that they have to understand."

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