

Shaking the Wrong Hand?

How the Israeli Zionist Left Perceives the Support of the American Christian Right

Abstract

Since 2001, the Israeli right has dominated every government and has been the primary policy maker. In the 2013 elections the center-left gained four seats in its parliament, running on a platform of domestic issues. The perceived calm and permanency of the occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, has allowed Israelis to focus primarily on these issues.

Economic and political support of Israel by American individuals and governments has been strong, and recently deemed unshakable. Until recently, the core supporters of Israel in the U.S. were from the Jewish community. However, in the past two decades the Christian Right has become increasingly vocal in its support of Israel, and has formed a strong alliance with conservative Israeli governments and organizations. I plan to explore, through interviews with the Israeli leftist elite, the attitudes of this emerging power bloc toward the American Christian Right.

The US-Israel Relationship

Eleven minutes after the state of Israel was declared, President Truman recognized the provisional Jewish government as the de facto authority in the newly born state. The Holocaust played a significant role in the justification for recognizing it. Although the U.S. needed oil from the Middle East, and the impending Cold War directed its foreign policy, on this issue moral justification trumped real-politick. Nineteen years later, with the Israeli victory in the 1967 Six Day War, Israel and the US had become de facto allies. Replacing France and Britain, the declining imperial powers in the area, the US forged strong ties with Israel and came to see it as its “small but muscular cohort in the Cold War” (Oren). Since the end of the Yom Kippur War, in 1973, Israel has received by some estimates over \$200 billion, in humanitarian and military aid from the US (Hever).

The popular resistance of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories in 1988, the First Intifada, brought the Palestinians’ situation under Israeli military and civil control to the world’s attention. The growing awareness of human rights and the successful fight against apartheid in South Africa bred a generation that became more aware of both post-colonial uprisings and of the ability of the U.S. to support a human rights agenda. The Palestinian struggle against the occupation has been accepted with increasing warmth in the U.S. Led by prominent American figures, including former president Jimmy Carter, the Palestinian Human Rights issue has challenged traditional perceptions of a natural alliance between Israel and the U.S. (Carter).

Jewish-American Support becomes less effective

Traditionally, American Jewry has been the most active supporter of Israel. In addition to American institutional aid, donations made by American Jewish organizations, according to some estimates, have reached 1-2 billion dollars annually and comprise 16 percent of annual donations made by Americans for international aid (Fleisch and Sasson). The extent of the support is not limited to philanthropy. The lobbying group AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) has extensive influence on Capitol Hill and support for Israel is bi-partisan both in the House of Representatives and the Senate (Mearsheimer and Walt).

The emergence of the Palestinian Human Rights agenda has caused American interests in the Middle East to diverge with Israel's. Israel's policy of continued occupation is an attempt to preserve the status quo, but has antagonized the current administration. With the growing isolation of Israel in the international community and with U.S. support weakening, Israel is seeking to reinforce its "special relationship." This has led Israeli policy makers to seek additional support in the United States.

The Religious Right as an Alternative Ally

One source of expanded political support for Israel in the U.S. is the Christian Right. For millions of Evangelical Christians the swift Israeli victory in the Six Day War was a sign of the beginning of the fulfillment of prophecies and the coming of a messianic age. In the past decade the Christian right has become a major supporter of Israel by lobbying for stronger diplomatic and institutional ties, and by providing philanthropic support (Clark). For example, CUFI (Christians United for Israel) has become an important player alongside AIPAC affecting congressional support.

The evangelical community constitutes over 25 percent of the U.S. population and their ability to mobilize has made them an important force in U.S. politics. Evangelical support for Israel is based on the historical connections between Israel and Christianity. The often cited verse "I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you" (Genesis 12-3), is used by biblical literalists to explain why Israel and the Jewish nation should be supported by Christians. Support of Israel can also be explained by the centrality of pre-millennial dispensationalism and the place of Israel in its apocalyptic vision (Weber).

In Israel, evangelical support has been embraced by the Israeli religious right. The ties between National-Zionist religious groups and the evangelical groups have grown substantially in recent years, and the American Religious Right has proven to be a strong ally. Any possible theological conflicts that may arise have dissipated, with the groups often jokingly stating that "when the messiah comes we'll ask him if it was his first visit or his second" (Hagee). This alliance has been welcomed by Israel's conservative governments that have adopted a hard line approach to the nation's security. But with the perceived permanency of the occupation or at least the relative diminution of violence against Israel, a new discourse revolving around social issues has been added to Israel's political agenda. This has made Israel's left an increasingly potent force in the country's domestic politics. For example, the Israeli center-left added four seats in the most recent election, and according to most recent polls, is continuing to gain popularity. This leads to the question of whether center-left parties, should they come to power, will be able to overcome fundamental ideological differences and work with and cultivate relationships with the Christian Right.

Research Question

The growing tide of Christian support was at first greeted with suspicion because of their apocalyptic message and the fear of proselytizing in Israel. Since then the Israeli right has embraced their support. In my research I plan to document the attitudes of the Israeli Zionist Labor left towards the evangelical support of Israel. Can the Zionist left, rooted in secularism and committed to the values of security and peace, align itself with the principles of the Christian right? How does the Zionist left elite perceive the support of American evangelical support of Israel?

In order to address these questions I plan to travel to Israel and interview government officials, policy makers and journalists. I have five confirmed interviews with current members of Knesset (the Israeli parliament) including number two on the Labor Zionist party – Itzhak "Buji" Herzog, and the former leader of the Christian-Israel Committee in the Knesset, Shay Hermesh. See appendix.

Appendix 1: Background on interviewees with whom I have confirmed interviews

Members of Knesset (The Israeli Parliament):

1. Isaac Herzog – Number 2 in the Labor Party. Former Minister of Welfare and Social Services, former Minister of the Diaspora and former Minister of Tourism
2. Hilik Bar – Number 7 in the Labor Party, currently General Secretary of the party and MK. Former Councilman for the City of Jerusalem where he was Minister of Tourism and Foreign Relations.
3. Erel Margalit – Number 10 in the Labor Party. Founder and managing partner of a successful venture capital firm, founder of two Non-Profit social organizations. This is his first term as MK.
4. Michal Biran – Number 13 in the Labor Party. Currently Chairwoman of the “Young Labor” movement, as part of the Labor Party. Former Parliamentary aid to Chairwoman of the Labor Party – Shelly Yechimovich.
5. Avishai Braverman – Number 9 in the Labor Party. Former Minister of Minorities. Stanford PhD Economics and former President of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

Influentials:

1. Shay Hermesh – Former MK, representing the Kadima Party. While serving in the Knesset was member of the parliamentary committee for relations with Christians.
2. Sol Lavi – Chairwoman of the “Ein Gedi – Jordan Valley” Labor Party.
3. Tomer Persico – Doctorate candidate at Tel-Aviv University, Blogger and editor of the journal “Spirit of the Land”
4. Gershom Gorenberg – Journalist and blogger, specializing in Middle Eastern politics and the interaction of religion and politics. Senior Correspondent for the American Prospect

Appendix 2: Budget Proposal

In order to coordinate the interviews, and further research at local institutions, a minimum of 20 days in Israel is required.

1. Air fare – Flight from Asheville to Tel- Aviv: \$1500
2. Transportation – 3 weeks of “group D” car rental: \$550
3. Room – local apartment sublet: \$1050 (\$350 per week)
4. Living expenses: \$700 (\$35 dollars per day)

Total Budget: \$3800

Additional resources at my disposal:

- My parents live in a suburb of Tel Aviv, and I could possibly stay there, for some of my stay.
- Public transportation could substitute car rental, reducing costs to around half.
- I have received \$1000 from the UNCA Center for Jewish Studies for this research.

Tentative Calendar:

April – finalize interview dates (in progress)

May 8 – fly to Israel

Week 1 (May 12-18): Arrive at interviews, visit research institutions

Week 2(May 19-25): Arrive at interviews, visit research institutions

Week 3 (May 26- June 1): Arrive at interviews, visit research institutions

June 2: Return to Asheville

Appendix 3: Tentative Interview Schedule

1. What are the core social issues facing Israel?
Do you find that dealing with social issues is electorally advantageous for the Left?
What appeals more to voters?
2. Can the left/your party distinguish itself on social issues?
Can the left/your party distinguish itself on security issues?
Do you find that dealing with security issues is electorally advantageous for the Left?
Which of the two do you deem more predominant as the party's/left's electoral future?
3. What is your knowledge about the extent of support of the American Christian Right for Israel?
Have you ever worked with Christian groups in the past? What was the experience like?
Why do you think the American Christian Right supports Israel?
Do you think that there are any theological similarities or differences between the Christian support of Israel and its character as a Jewish state? If so what are the differences, and how do you overcome them?
Do you think it's wise to accept the support of the American Christian Right? Do you trust them as an ally?
Do you feel that there are any strings attached to the political/economic support of American Christians?
Do you think that the left's platform can co-exist with the American Christian Right's platform? Is this alliance a result of necessity or is it "natural"?
4. If the Israeli left/your party were to win the next elections which Israeli parties would it likely align itself with? (To the left or to the right? What is its natural alliance?)
Can your party accept the support of the American Christian Right?
Are you comfortable with the American Christian Right's platform on American domestic issues and with their policies in the U.S.?
5. If the Israeli left were to win the next elections, and attempt to advance peace, do you think the American Christian Right will support the elected Israeli government? What if the peace agreement included compromises on Jerusalem?
Are you worried about the American Christian Right gaining support in Israel? Do you see their influence? Do you think their support is visible to the Israeli public?
Do you think the Israeli left is influenced by the American Christian Right's support of Israel?
Do you think the Israeli right is influenced by the American Christian Right's support of Israel?
6. Do you think there is a difference between Jewish support of Israel and Christian support of Israel?
Do you think that Jewish American support of Israel can be relied on? Do you see any processes that are changing/realigning the Jewish political support of Israel?

Agree/disagree statements

1. The American Christian Right are radical Christian fundamentalists
2. I understand and agree with the American Christian Right's support of Israel
3. The American Christian Right has too much influence on American politics
4. In Israel there is no need to separate church from state
5. I don't trust the American Christian Right's support of Israel
6. The American Christian Right does not have too much influence on Israeli politics
7. I can rely on future support from the American Christian Right, regardless of Israel's future policies

Background questions:

1. Have you spent time in the US? How long?
2. How frequently do you attend religious services? How important is religion in your life? How strong is your belief in God?
3. How long have you been active in politics?
4. Would you consider yourself upper-class/middle class?
5. Do you have an academic degree and where did you get it from?
6. Where did you grow up?

Outlet

I intend to present my work to as many outlets as possible, including UNCA's Spring Symposium. My advisor has suggested several additional outlets. However he has a reputation for allowing only papers that he deems acceptable to be presented at conferences.

Training

I have completed CITI – Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative. (Attached separately)

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