

## **The American Evangelical Christians and the U.S. Middle East policy: A case study of the Christians United for Israel (CUFI)**

**Mohd Afandi Salleh\*** and **Hafiz Zakariya\*\***

**Abstract:** This study examines the relationship between religious belief and interest group activism in influencing American foreign policy making by highlighting a group within the American Evangelical Christians namely, Christians United for Israel (CUFI). At present, the organization is actively involved in lobbying for influence over American foreign policy towards the Middle East in general and Israel in particular. This study explores the background and strategies of CUFI, by discussing how its underpinning religious beliefs (notably Eschatology and attitude towards End-Time) provide the basis of support for the state of Israel. It contends that the activism of the organization demonstrates how religious beliefs can constitute a strong factor in motivating lobbying activities for a potential impact on US foreign policy making.

**Keywords:** U.S. Middle East policy, Christians United for Israel, End-Time theology, Israel-Palestine conflicts, American Evangelical Christians.

**Abstrak:** Kajian ini mengkaji hubungan antara kepercayaan agama dan kepentingan aktivisme kumpulan dalam mempengaruhi dasar luar Amerika Syarikat dengan menonjolkan kumpulan Kristian Evangelical di Amerika iaitu, kumpulan Kristian Bersatu untuk Israel (CUFI). Pada masa ini, CUFI terlibat secara aktif dalam melobi untuk mendapatkan pengaruh ke atas dasar

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\* Mohd Afandi Salleh is Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Law and International Relations, University of Sultan Zainal Abidin, Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia. Email: [afandi@unisza.edu.my](mailto:afandi@unisza.edu.my).

\*\* Hafiz Zakariya is Associate Professor, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia. Email: [hafizz@iium.edu.my](mailto:hafizz@iium.edu.my).

luar Amerika Syarikat terhadap Timur Tengah secara amnya dan khususnya terhadap Israel. Kajian ini meneroka latar belakang dan strategi-strategi CUFI, dengan membincangkan bagaimana asas kepercayaan agama - terutamanya Eskatologi dan pandangan terhadap Akhir Zaman - menyediakan asas sokongan bagi negara Israel. Kajian ini berpendapat bahawa aktivisme organisasi tersebut dapat mencerminkan bagaimana kepercayaan agama boleh membentuk satu faktor yang kukuh dalam menggerakkan aktiviti melobi untuk memberi impak terhadap pembentukan dasar luar AS.

**Kata kunci:** Dasar Luar AS di Timur Tengah, Kristian Bersatu untuk Israel, Teologi Akhir Zaman, Konflik Israel-Palestin, Kristian Evangelical Amerika.

There are many studies that have attempted to investigate and explore the reasons behind the unique alliance between the US and Israel. Some studies have explained that this relationship is based on the realist approach which emphasizes the geo-political strategic importance of Israel in the Middle East, as well as the US economic interests in the region. There are also studies which made attempts to explain that the relationship is based on “soft factors”; the influence of various interest group lobbies such as pro-Israel lobby groups, the Jewish community’s influence in the socio-economic landscape of the US and public opinion in the United States. Paul Findley (1985), the former Illinois congressman, contends that “It is no overstatement to say that [the pro-Israel lobby] has effectively gained control of virtually all of Capitol Hill’s action on Middle East policy ... [and] lobby groups function as an informal extension of the Israeli government” (pp. 25-26). Likewise, Cheryl Rubenberg (1986) suggests that besides the assumptions of American foreign policy making elite that perceive Israel as a strategic asset to US interests that serves as an extension of American supremacy in the Middle East, the power of pro-Israeli lobby including the Evangelical Christians in American politics is another crucial determining factor.

This study aims to explain the role of religion-based interest groups, such as the American Evangelical Christians, and how they have attempted to exert influence on US foreign policy towards Israel. This initiative has been made in order to understand and integrate the profound factor of the American Evangelical groups’ religious beliefs as an underpinning catalyst for their motive in exerting their influence in US foreign policy making towards Israel. We examine one of the

American Evangelical Christians' staunch organizations, the Christians United for Israel (CUFI), to see how their religious beliefs could potentially become one of the factors that possibly contribute to the US foreign policy decision making towards Israel. We argue that the support that was extended by the American Evangelical Christians in general and CUFI in particular to Israel and the Jewish people continues a long tradition in the American Evangelical Christians' religious history. In this regard, we also highlight how religious beliefs based on the doctrine of "millennial dispensationalism," adopted by CUFI, has played a fundamental role in its continued support for the American foreign policy in the Middle East, particularly to the return of Jews to Palestine and the security of the State of Israel. Finally, we stress that CUFI is part of the American Christian Zionist movement that has consistently demonstrated its earnest concern over the American foreign policy towards Israel where it attempts to influence the American policy in the Middle East through various means especially in supporting the survival of the State of Israel. In addition, through Christian Zionist organizations such as CUFI, the American Evangelical Christians have contributed significant theological, political, moral and financial support to Israel.

### **The American Evangelical Christians and Israel**

Historically, Israel has always mattered a lot for the American Evangelical Christians. They are among the strongest supporters of the State of Israel and their unequivocal support for the Jewish state has never declined. Perhaps their support poses an even greater influence on US policy towards Israel than the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) or other Jewish lobby groups (Kaplan, 2005). Similarly, a study by Mayer (2004) suggests that Evangelical Christians in the United States have been the strongest supporters of Israel for a very long time. He stresses that the support has become more prominent as the Evangelical leaders have increasingly advocated the support of Israel to their followers. Furthermore, the Evangelical Christians' policies towards Israel are considered consistently uncritical; thus, they always stand for American foreign policies that are pro-Israel (Durham, 2004). This is because they believe that to stand against the Jews is to stand against God. Thus, they should forever show and provide firm support to Israel, as well as defend it from any potential enemy through the American foreign policy. As a matter of belief, American

Evangelical Christians characterize the establishment of the State of Israel as “one of the most striking fulfilments of Biblical prophecy the world has ever seen” (Malachy, 1978, p. 43). Therefore, the American Evangelical Christians have offered undivided support for Israel and shown its uncompromised commitment throughout the history of Israel. This argument is supported by Ruby’s survey (2007) that shows 69% of white American Evangelicals still believe that “God gave Israel to the Jewish people”, and 59% of them also believe that “Israel is the fulfilment of biblical prophecy.”

Besides consistently becoming the strongest supporters of Israel, the American Evangelical Christians also oppose any American policies which seem to pressure Israel. Lienesch (1993) argues that the Evangelical Christians commitment to defend Israel is mainly derived from the Old Testament which says: “To stand against the Jews is to stand against God” and God’s message in the Book of Genesis states: “I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curses thee” (Genesis 12:3). Hence, the American Evangelical Christians mostly celebrated the rebirth and the restoration of the Jews in Israel as evidence and justification for their “dispensationalist” theology and as a part of the divine plan for further developments in the apocalyptic process, which will lead to the second coming of Jesus Christ. With one of the main prophecies now in place, dispensationalists perceived that they had the “reference point they had been waiting for”, and had proof that God kept his promises (Weber, 1987, p. 204).

It is important to note that most organizations associated with Christian Zionism in the US are led by the American Evangelical Christians leaders. Therefore, it is not surprising when some scholars suggest that the Christian Zionist organizations are also part of forces within the Evangelical Christians advocate groups. Sizer (2004, p. 93) notes that “[w]ith the high profile support of Fundamentalist leaders like Falwell and Robertson ... Christian Zionism [became] synonymous with American Evangelicalism.” Likewise, Durham (2004) believes many American Evangelical Christians organizations such as the Moral Majority, Christian Friends for Israeli Communities, the American Alliance of Jews and Christians, the Christian Coalition and the Religious Roundtable are also Christian Zionist organizations. Croft (2007) also suggests that many Evangelical Protestant organizations have not only supported but also defended Israel’s interests and become

its “valuable friends”. Gary Bauer, an influential leader of the American Evangelical Christians feels “deeply that America has an obligation to stand by Israel,” based “on reading of the Scripture, where Evangelicals believe God has promised that Land to the Jewish people” (Stricket, 2002, p. 82). Furthermore, a famous Evangelical Christians leader, Jerry Falwell, has repeatedly declared that his support for Israel is his religious duty and he believes that to stand against Israel is to stand against God. According to Ralph Reed, former head of the Christian Coalition and co-founder of Stand for Israel, “Christians have the potential to be the most effective constituency influencing a foreign policy since the end of the Cold War ... They are shifting the centre of gravity in the pro-Israel community to become more conservative” (Brownfield, 2002, pp. 71-72). A prominent scholar of American history and religion, George Masdern (1991), notes that “Although impossible to measure, perhaps Evangelicalism’s greatest political impact on American policy during the past fifty years has been its role in broadening the popular base for an almost unreserved support for the state of Israel” (p. 77). Meanwhile, Jean Hardistry the founder of the Political Research Associates, states that:

Throughout U.S. history, Conservative Christians who were Evangelical or fundamentalist and have taken the word of the Bible literally, have believed that the creation of Israel was a necessity for the fulfilment of Christian prophecy... So it’s in the interest of Christians focused on the ultimate accomplishment of the Second Coming of Christ that the Jews go back to Israel, and this creates a natural affinity with Jews around the issue of Israel (cited in Kaplan, 2005, p. 27).

### **CUFI and Israel**

CUFI is perhaps the largest and strongest religious organization within the American Evangelical Christians that dedicated for the cause of Israel. In 2010, CUFI claimed a membership of around 428,000 and its annual budget had increased to \$6 million (Bach, 2010). As its main activities are dedicated solely to lobby any issues related to the security of Israel, the organization intended to assemble “an American grassroots movement focused on the support of Israel,” and its purpose is “to provide a national American association through which every pro-Israel church, para-church organization, ministry or individual in America can speak and act with one voice in support of Israel in

matters related to biblical issues” (“About Christians United for Israel,” 2009). In this respect, CUFI has demonstrated a theological basis for its movement by quoting two verses from the Bible: “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3) and “For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem’s sake I will not remain quiet, till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch” (Isaiah 62:1). These quotes are employed as justification for the organization moving forward with its goals and objectives. While its first goal is to educate and build Christian support for Israel throughout America, the second one is to communicate pro-Israeli perspectives to their elected officials or politicians. Based on these two goals, this organization has initiated various programmes and organized various events since its establishment in 2006; its particular focus is to support the survival of the Israeli state, as well as its interests. Although the verses of the Bible are adopted to illustrate its goals and objectives, the officials of the organization deny the organization has any theological reference in its statement of purpose, goals and objectives. In other words, CUFI presents itself as a secular organization due to its respect for the separation of religion and politics. On that premise, it is argued that CUFI’s leaders talk mostly about alliances, Israeli politics, and Israel’s enemies, rather than Christian beliefs or eschatology doctrines such as the end-time doctrine or the Second Coming of Jesus (Wood, 2007).

CUFI’s founder and present leader, John Hagee, was reported as following the Bible’s mandate to protect Israel due to end-time theology. In the AIPAC Policy Conference in March 2007, Hagee articulated his organization’s commitment to the cause of Israel. He stated that CUFI and the other like-minded Evangelicals have “a deep-seated faith-based belief to love Israel, to speak up for Israel, to stand up for Israel, to pray for Israel, and to financially support Israel” (Hagee, 2007). His belief in what Evangelical Christians should stand for is more evident in his famous book *Jerusalem Countdown*, which became a bestseller soon after its publication in January 2006 and sold over 620,000 copies within four months of its release. The book was on *A Today’s* overall bestseller list, *Wal-Mart’s* inspirational bestseller list, and the Christian Bookseller’s Association’s (CBA’s) bestseller list (Posner, 2008). *Jerusalem Countdown* mostly discusses Biblical prophecies such as

“Armageddon”, “Rapture”, “Tribulation”, and “the Second Coming of Jesus” to the world. For example, the book states: “Before us is nuclear countdown with Iran, followed by Ezekiel’s war and the final battle - the Battle of Armageddon. The end of the world as we know it is rapidly approaching” (Slater, 2007).

### **CUFI and the Dispensationalist theology**

CUFI in general shares a similar view of the American Evangelical Christians’ political theology. Its political theology is one of the major factors that shaped the movement’s understanding, motives and objectives of its involvement in political activities. Its political theology, centred on Israel, is based on dispensationalism, an apocalyptic belief, and is rooted in the conservative Christian theological doctrine of eschatology, in the idea of the “end-times”. Wood (2007) suggests that though CUFI has officially distinguished between religious belief and its political activism, in practice this idea is not widely accepted. Apart from that he believes that CUFI followers adhere to dispensationalism. However, because dispensationalist eschatological beliefs are a sensitive issue and could possibly cause uneasiness among Jews, CUFI leaders always avoid talking about them officially or publicly. Nevertheless, most of the CUFI members know that the eschatological belief is part of their main reason for supporting Israel. Wood furthermore argues that:

the downplaying of traditional held beliefs does not appear to have caught on among the membership, and the difference in approach between the leadership and the base was sometimes noticeable at the conference: On the speakers’ platform, the talk was mostly about alliances, Israeli politics, and Israel’s enemies, while on the floor (and in conversations among members), talk was more about Jesus, Scripture, and doing God’s work (pp. 81-82) .

Arguably, the doctrine of dispensationalism has become an enormous factor in shaping the political and ideological views of the movement and casting its imagination towards future world events as well as interpretation of the world’s history (Lienesch, 1993). According to Sizer (2000), dispensationalism is seen literally as a chronological map that provides conservative Protestants with a guide to the end of the world. He believes that dispensationalist theology:

is the most influential theological system within the universal church today. Largely unrecognised and subliminal, it has increasingly shaped the presuppositions of fundamentalists, evangelicals, Pentecostals and charismatic thinking concerning Israel and Palestine over the past one hundred and fifty years (p. 142).

Sizer (2000) furthermore believes that the dispensationalist theology has a devastating impact, as its followers tend to seek the fulfilment of the dispensational apocalyptic vision of the future by becoming actively involved and influential in politics. However, it is worth noting that not all researchers on dispensationalism agree that it is a purely theological doctrine. Harding (1994), for instance, argues that dispensationalism is not a theological doctrine; instead, it is only a “narrative” in the history and culture of conservative Protestantism. She notes that dispensationalism is:

not always political in the sense of advocating specific actions that count as political in American culture, but it is always political. It is political insofar as it constitutes not only current events for many born-again believers, but also their understanding of and place in history (p. 57).

The theology of dispensationalism was first introduced by the English preacher John Nelson Darby who migrated to the United States in the 19th century. His teaching was principally based on a literal interpretation of the Bible, especially on the prophecies in the Book of Revelation. Based on the Book of Revelation (20: 1-7), Darby argued that God created seven “dispensations” in human history. The first dispensation was the paradise of the Garden of Eden, and the final dispensation will be a millennial kingdom as Jesus will come again to the world, known as “the Second Coming”, and establish his reign on earth for 1,000 years of peace before the end of the world takes place. Darby claimed that he had successfully decoded the timeline by which God preordained specific historical epochs or dispensations, including the final dispensation in which the end-time will occur. In this timeline, devout Christians are “raptured” up into heavenly protection before the tribulations begin. Then, the sinful are punished, and Christ returns to this world to rule his loyal forces for 1,000 years - a millennium full of peace and prosperity.



Darby believed that a central feature of the dispensational system was the place of the Jews in the divine plan for the end of history; the Jews had rejected Christ and so God had set his originally chosen people aside and the Christian Church superseded the nation of Israel. But before the rapture, the Jews play a crucial role in fulfilling the Biblical end-time prophecy by returning to Palestine, resettling the Biblical lands, and rebuilding Jerusalem, in particular the Third Temple on the site currently occupied by the Dome of Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque. The Israeli state will experience resistance from a group representing “Anti-Christ” and will be subjected to dreadful wars. However, the remnant of the people who come through these wars will ultimately recognise Christ as the true Messiah and so greet him at his Second Coming to establish the so-called Kingdom of God in this world in the land of Israel (Oldfield, 2004). According to Darby, God promised the land of Jerusalem to the Jews and this covenant that took place between God and Abraham was binding forever, though it has not yet been fulfilled. Eventually, this dispensationalist theology became more popular and widely accepted among the American Evangelical Christians, especially after the publication of *The Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909 by Cyrus Ingerson Scofield. It is believed that Scofield relied heavily on Darby’s writing. Gerstner, for example, who studied Darby and Scofield’s apocalyptic thought, argues that the resemblance between both theologians is “deep and systematic” (Sizer, 2000). Similar to Darby, Scofield also believed that God’s purpose in the second coming is to bring the Jewish people back to Palestine and rebuild the ancient temple of Solomon.

Another prominent figure in dispensationalist theology is Hal Lindsey. He was considered as the “Father of Apocalyptic Dispensational Zionism” by Sizer, “The Jeremiah for this Generation” by *Time* magazine and was “the best-selling author of the decade” according to *The New York Times* (Sizer, 2000). Lindsey has published more than twenty books and over 80 million have been sold in different languages. His most famous book *The Late Great Planet* has alone sold over 40 million copies (Sizer, 2000, Northcott, 2004). Like Darby and Scofield, Lindsey confidently argues that his interpretation of the Bible on the future world events will happen according to the dispensationalist apocalyptic prophecies. Undoubtedly, his writings have influenced some of the conservative Protestants who believe in the dispensationalist theology.

### **CUFI's influential leader: John Hagee**

Reverend John Hagee, the Head Pastor of Cornerstone Church, San Antonio and the founder of CUFI is considered as the most influential leader of the organization. In his book, *Jerusalem Countdown* published in 2006, he outlines his views on Biblical prophecies and American foreign policy. The book, which sold over 620,000 copies, emphasizes the need to safeguard US and Israeli security and the need to go to war against Iran. Written in 2005, at a time when Iran's nuclear programme was still unreported, he claims that a military confrontation with Iran was an inevitable Biblical prophecy that preceded Armageddon and the Second Coming of Jesus. To protect the US and Israel from nuclear attack, Iran's nuclear weapon development programme must be stopped. With enriched uranium in its possession, Iran, he asserts, has the capability to produce suitcase bombs that can destroy American cities with one blast. These bombs will also be used against Israel. Comparing the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad to Hitler who would wage another world war, he emphasizes that the question of a pre-emptive strike against Iran is not a matter of whether it should be conducted, but rather when it should be executed. Hagee further argues that in the event of war against Iran, the Arab world will be united under the Russian leadership. He also claims that China and Russia are America's enemies and that Russia has been providing Iran with technological assistance that will help Iran build a long-range missile that could reach New York City (Posner, 2008).

Hagee's book also highlights the fact that Israel has no choice but to strike at Iran's nuclear facilities, with or without US assistance. The strike will provoke Russia, whose main intention is to control Persian Gulf oil and to lead the Arab countries in the war against Israel. They will, however, be eventually wiped out by the forces of God. Hagee went on to quote Ezekiel's prediction of "fire upon those who live in security in the coastlands" as a warning to the US to intervene in the case of invasion of Israel by Russia, as failure by the US to defend Israel will cause it to be surrounded by nuclear warfare on its east and west coasts. To further persuade the US, Hagee cites Genesis 12:3 in which God says: "I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you." The vacuum created as a result of God's decimation of the Russian army, according to Hagee, will be filled by the "demonic" head of the European Union as the one who will rule "a one-world government, a

one-world currency and a one-world religion” for three and a half years. The EU will be confronted by a false prophet, identified as China at Armageddon in Israel. As the two parties prepare for the final battle, Jesus will return and cast all non-believers into “a lake of fire burning with brimstone”, marking the beginning of his millennial reign. Hagee’s absolutist arguments and the subsequent discussions by the Christian media outlets reflect his idea of good versus evil, believers against non-believers, Judeo-Christian against Islamic civilization, and American-Israeli alliance against the rest of the world. Hagee also supports US unilateralist military policy, views diplomacy with contempt, and regards the present UN Security Council as a “joke” (Posner, 2008).

Two months after the publication of the *Jerusalem Countdown*, Hagee was interviewed by *The Jerusalem Post*. In the interview, he expressed his hope that the US would join Israel in a military pre-emptive strike against Iran, in the effort to neutralize Iran’s nuclear capabilities for the salvation of western civilization. This effort, he added, is as important to the US as it is to Israel. Hagee also made clear his aversion to diplomacy, citing that Islamofascist mentality will never respond favourably to diplomacy as its agenda is the destruction of Israel and death to Jews and Christians. Hagee believes that Israel should take part in the pre-emptive strike against Iran even though the US could do it on its own if it decided to do so. In a series of sermons, Hagee argues that World War III has already started and the battle for western civilization is already on the way. Hagee further argues that the 9/11 attack on the US was perpetrated by Islamic fanatics whose intention was the destruction of the US and Israel. He states: “America was attacked on 9/11 by Islamic fanatics who intend to destroy American nation” and “we are at war with Islamic fanatics who intend to destroy the United States and Israel” (Posner, 2008, p. 110).

Maintaining his long-standing argument that Israel must be protected and Jerusalem must remain as the undivided capital of the Jewish people, Hagee declared his intention of employing CUFI as the vehicle to unite all pro-Israel individuals and organizations under one umbrella, to speak up for Israel in the US, and to act as a formal lobby platform to protect Israel. In his address to the Christians United for Israel, Washington Summit 2012, John Hagee made it clear that CUFI is “the front line of defense for Israel in the United States of America.” He added that “the covenant that God made with Abraham is eternal and it

cannot be repealed by the president of the United States, by the president of the United Nations” (“John Hagee: Evangelical Christians”). Hagee and CUFI are also engaged in an effort to establish an Evangelical-Jewish alliance to support US foreign policy in the Middle East (Slater, 2007). The next section highlights CUFI’s agendas and lobbying activities which relate to American foreign policy in the Middle East. It discusses some important activities organized by CUFI in supporting Israeli state including lobbying American foreign policy towards Israel.

### **CUFI’s support to Israel**

CUFI is considered as a single-issue organization and the state of Israel is its only interest. As a result, CUFI is intentionally involved in lobbying for American foreign policy, deemed relevant to Israel. With its membership almost equal to AIPAC, CUFI mostly shows interest in US foreign policy towards Israel. Thus, it has listed its three important efforts in pursuing its interest in lobbying US foreign policy. The first effort is organizing an annual Washington-Israel Summit in Washington DC. The summit is an official event to show its commitment to support Israel, and to gather CUFI members and selected American and Israeli officials to discuss Israel’s security. In a live video conference with Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu during the CUFI 2009 Annual Summit, John Hagee claimed that over 50 million Christians would remain steadfast in their undivided support to Israel on the issue of “Israel’s sovereign right to grow and develop the settlements ... and not yield to the pressure of the United States government.” In response, Netanyahu expressed his appreciation for the Christians’ unwavering support for Israel; he told the audience that “today millions of Christians stand with Israel because they stand for freedom...” (Rosenberg, 2009). In the 2010 Annual Summit, Netanyahu once again addressed the 1000 participants by video conference from Jerusalem and emphasized the importance of Israel’s relationship with CUFI. He stated that “Time after time, through thick and thin, you have stood shoulder to shoulder with our state, and I have come here tonight to thank you for unwavering friendship... I salute you, the people of Israel salute you, the Jewish people salute you” (Bach, 2010, p. 83).

The second type of CUFI effort to ensure that Israel as a state is consistently safe and secure is the mobilization of its members through CUFI’s Rapid Alerts system to generate millions of phone calls and

e-mails requesting the American administration and Congress to support Israel unconditionally. CUFI also focuses on lobbying state governments by mobilizing its members to voice up to their state leaders in order to protect American and Israeli interests. This includes actions such as pressuring leaders of state governments to divest state public funds from companies that are involved in any business or investment with Iran or Sudan. Besides that, CUFI also urges the Americans to put pressure on the United Nations under Resolution 1701 to strengthen UN peacekeepers in Lebanon by more actively combating Hezbollah's arms smuggling (Hijab, 2007). Nevertheless, during that Second Annual Conference, CUFI also discussed the threat to global security posed by Islam as well as the relevance of the United Nations to the world community. Though the conference's theme was the US-Israel relationship, most of the sub-themes were about the threat of Islam and Muslims. Describing Muslims as "Islamofascists" and supporters of "Islamist totalitarianism", CUFI continuously claims that Islam creates grave danger not only for Israel and the US, but also for the rest of the world. This was evident when one of the participants at the conference claimed that the ongoing US struggle in its global war against terror is actually a "war on militant Islam". They also discussed the issue of the growing Muslim domination of the world economy, especially the dependency of the US on Arab/Muslim oil production. Meanwhile, another target subject at the conference was the United Nations, which was denounced as the de facto enemy of Israel and the United States (Wood, 2007).

CUFI has also expressed its response to the Annapolis Summit 2007. According to CUFI, the summit, convened by George W. Bush to work towards a peace agreement between Israel and Palestinian authorities by negotiating a two-state solution, was seen as a "forum to coerce Israel to accept certain conditions" (Scharold, 2007). Hagee, for example, wrote on his church's website: "At this point in America's history, we are plainly rejecting the Word of God because, according to Joel 3, we are helping to divide the land of Israel. We, through billions in foreign aid, are pressuring Israel to abandon the covenant land that God has given to the Jewish people forever. America is in the valley of decision, and we are making the wrong decision" (Scharold, 2007). On the eve of the Annapolis Conference on November 26, 2007, a group of leaders of the Orthodox Jewish organization and the

American Evangelical Christians organization met with senior White House officials, including President Bush's National Security Advisor, Stephen Hadley, to show their great concern over the conference's initial proposal of dividing Jerusalem which would eventually lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state (Rosner, 2007). In his blog, Brog reported that in the meeting, the representatives not only raised their worries about the credibility and ability of the Palestinian authorities to stop terrorism against Israel, but also argued that the proposal of dividing Jerusalem would increase terrorists attacks on Israeli border ("CUFI," 2007). Soon after the meeting, David Brog declared on behalf of the Christian representatives that they were opposed to any US administration's decision to pressure Israel into making territorial concession to Palestinians. He further noted that the Christians United for Israel would monitor the process of the negotiation closely ("Christian Right," 2007). In addition, Jan Markell (2007), one of CUFI's directors, stated that the Annapolis Conference "should be viewed as one more instalment payment in the sell out of Israel and of American interests in the Middle East" and claimed the conference was a "diplomatic lynching" of Israel.

The American Evangelical Christians' financial support for Israel has become more visible in recent years. Though it is not significant in comparison to the US aid, it is still important and provides an important source of revenue for Israel. Furthermore, this financial contribution could compensate the revenues which Israel found declining from the Jewish diaspora. The revenue mostly comes from fundraising campaigns, donations from individuals and churches, and the selling of Israel's crafts and merchandise. According to Kaplan, the Evangelical Christians are able to attract millions of dollars of funds for Israel annually. She argues that these funds come from hundreds of thousands of Christian donors and supporters who are mobilized by the Conservative Christians' networks of as many as 25,000 churches and also from various formal organizations such as Americans for a Safe Israel, Christians' Israel Public Action Campaign, Stand for Israel, the Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Christian Friends of Israel, Christians United for Israel, and the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (Kaplan, 2005). According to Barbara Victor (2005), the Wings of Eagles, a programme under IFCJ, used \$100 million of its budget to fund Russian Jews' migration to Israel. According to IFCJ's president,

Yechiel Eckstein, about half of the money collected by the organization was allocated to help the diaspora Jews relocate to Israel, and the rest was for food, medical care and other assistance for Jews in Israel (Broadway, 2004). There was also a report that from 1994 to 2002, the Jerusalem Friendship Fund and Christian Coalition have been able to collect around \$60 million in donations from the Evangelical community to help fund the Jewish immigration to Israel (Haas, 2002). Similarly, a study by Croft has identified a few Conservative Christians organizations, such as Maranatha Chapel in San Diego, which raise funds to arrange for the Jewish migration to Israel (Croft, 2007). Likewise, the International Christian Jewish Fellowship was reported to have initiated a fundraising campaign and successfully collected \$20 million in 2002 (Kaplan, 2005) and \$47 million in 2004 to be donated to Israel (Tobin, 2004). CUFI, through his founder's ministry, the Cornerstone Church in Texas, has been active in organizing fundraising campaigns for Israel since the 1980s and was able to raise a significant amount of donations for Israel. It was reported by *The Jerusalem Post* that in the year 2007 alone, the ministries contributed \$8.5 million (Elbein, 2007) while in April 2008, *The New York Times* reported that Hagee, through his CUFI organization, raised another \$6 million (Marlowe, 2008) followed by another \$9.5 million in October 2008 (Fingerhut, 2009).

Another source of indirect financial support from the Evangelical Christians to Israel is from its promotion of religious tourism. The director of the Pilgrim Promoting Division of the Israeli Ministry of Trade and Tourism estimated that around 250,000 Americans visited Israel in 1980 and the majority of them were American Evangelicals who visited Judea and Samaria, Biblical sites located in the West Bank (Victor, 2005). Mearsheimer and Walt (2007) note that Christian tourism to Israel, in the form of religious pilgrimage and holiday celebrations in Jerusalem, attracts revenue of around \$1 billion annually to Israel. As Evangelical tourists are an important source of revenue for the development of Israel's economy, a series of official visits from the Israel Ministry of Tourism to the United States took place to enhance Israel's tourism promotion initiatives. It was reported that Israel's Tourism Minister visited the United States on numerous occasions in 2003 to show the significance of conservative Christian tourists' money to Israel's economy. *The Washington Times* stated that: "Israeli Tourism

Minister, Benjamin Elon, has embarked on a “Bible Belt tour” to exploit Evangelical Christians enthusiasm for Israel, to lure Christian tourists back to Israel and to derail President Bush’s “road map” to Middle East peace” (Broadway, 2004). Benjamin Elon has expressed his gratitude on behalf of Israel for the efforts organized by the Conservative Christians in promoting Israel’s tourism. He was quoted as saying: “We wish to thank those who have not abandoned us ... In the past three years; those who have come were Jews - out of solidarity - and Evangelical Christians” (Duin, 2003). Elon has also estimated that around 400,000 Evangelicals visited Israel in 2003 alone. In February 2004, he honoured Pat Robertson at the National Association of Broadcasters Convention for his leadership in promoting the pilgrimages to Israel, despite the US government’s travel warning for Americans after the 9/11 attacks. He was reported to have praised Robertson and regarded him as having “saved Israel’s tourism from bankruptcy” (Broadway, 2004). CUFI is one of the Evangelical organizations that have been actively involved in promoting tourism to Israel among its members as well as to other Evangelicals. Since its existence, CUFI has organized a series of visits to Jerusalem, which were participated by thousands of its members. In 2008, CUFI announced two new annual programmes - Jerusalem Summit and Unity Walk Israel. The main objective of these fortnight long programmes was to bring the Christians to tour Israel and to demonstrate their solidarity with Israel. According to the CUFI official website, the programme was the “first time in CUFI history that the organization will be bringing members on a mission to Israel to show their support”. During its first event in April 2008, John Hagee led the tour where over one thousand people participated (“Christians United for Israel,” 2009).

The American Evangelical Christians also launched a moral support campaign for Israel through public statements and advertisements on behalf of Israeli interests. A campaign such as “Christians Call for a United Jerusalem” was carried out in full page coverage in major US newspapers and Christian journals. In addition, the advertisement’s pro-Zionist/Israel themes such as “Jerusalem has been the spiritual and political capital of only the Jewish people for 3,000 years” and “Israel’s biblical claim to the land was eternal covenant from God” were continuously promoted in the local newspapers (Wagner, 2003). CUFI, for instance, through its main event - “The Nights to Honor Israel” is



able to attract a large number of attendees among Evangelical Christians, to pay tribute to the Jewish people around the world and to the State of Israel. Another regular event is a signature campaign called the “Israel Pledge” that intends to support the right of the Jewish people to live in their ancestral land and Israel’s right to defend itself against terrorism. Since 2006, over 95 similar events have taken place all over the US and CUFI claims a participation of a total of 1,100 churches from all states in the US (“Christians honor Israel”, 2009).

### **CUFI and Israel’s security: Iran as a threat**

Since its inception in 2006, CUFI has considered Iranian military capabilities, especially its potential to acquire nuclear technology, as a great threat to Israel’s security. In its efforts, CUFI has continuously tried to lobby the US administration to deter Iran, not only through diplomatic and economic sanctions, but also to consider military action against Iran in order to stop it from pursuing its nuclear programme. For CUFI, the urgency for the US to stop Iran’s nuclear project is as important as providing military and economic aid to Israel. For example, John Hagee led a campaign to pressure leaders of the Ohio State Administration to divert state funds from companies considered to be involved in any business or investment dealings with Iran. CUFI’s Second Annual Conference, held in July 2007 and which attracted more than 4,000 participants, showed that CUFI’s ultimate priority is to highlight the threat of Iran on Israel. One of its main lobbying agendas emphasizes the urgency for America to provide military aid to Israel and stop Iran’s uranium enrichment programme by applying not only diplomatic and economic pressure, but also military action as an option. For instance, in May 2007, CUFI took the effort to mobilize its members to call and urge the Ohio State Representatives to vote for the Iran-Sudan Divestment Bill. The bill was introduced in the Ohio House of Representatives by Josh Mindel (R-Lyndhurst) and Shannon Jones (R-Springboro) and it prohibited the state’s public pension funds from being invested in companies which had business ties to Iranian’s petroleum and natural gas sector. There are two reasons behind the introduction of this bill. First, the Iranian activity in developing its nuclear programme is considered a defiance of UN Security Council Resolutions and would pose a threat to the security of the United States, Israel and their allies. Second, it is believed that the genocide in Darfur was organized by the Sudanese government and its allies. According

to CUFI, this effort of divestment would deny Iran and Sudan foreign capital that helps fund their activities (“Christian leaders,” 2009).

At the 2008 CUFI Annual Conference, the organization listed the threat of the Iranian nuclear project to the security of Israel as one of its main agendas. The summit was also intended to lobby elected representatives in Congress for their commitment to pressure the Iranian government by supporting the “Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act of 2008”, which was approved by the Senate Banking Committee. Interestingly, the discussions of the threats of Iran’s nuclear project to Israel’s security had been coined together with American security. In other words, whenever there is a potential threat to the security of Israel, it can also pose a danger to American security. In CUFI’s brochure that was circulated at the conference, it was stated that: “The enemies of Israel are the enemies of America. They are the enemies of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These enemies have drawn the battle lines. If a line has to be drawn, then draw that line around Christians and Jews” (Frykholm, 2008, p. 36). Moreover, Senator Joseph Lieberman (I-CT) also emphasized the same rhetoric in his speech delivered at the summit: “The threat from Iran lies not just in their arming, training and funding terrorists throughout the Middle East and the world, but even more from the nuclear development programme they are clearly pursuing. History warns us what can happen when we don’t take the threats of such tyrants and terrorists seriously... You see Israel and America under threat, and so you stand for both” (Sidman, 2008). In the summit, John Hagee reminded the participants of the danger of Iran’s nuclear development that he believed could result in another holocaust for Israelis. In addition he also compared the Iranian president with Hitler when he said:

There is a new Hitler in the Middle East; he is the President of Iran. He intends to build nuclear weapons and his brazen declarations to kill the Jews have been carried on the front pages of the world’s press. In 1935, the Christians of the world were silent. In the 21st century, Christians are united in their support of Israel. We will not be silent. In our pulpits, on our global media networks, in our school and universities and in the halls of Congress, we will not keep silent. The voice of evil will not go uncontested in our generation. Not on our watch (Sidman, 2008).

Moreover, John Hagee has also consistently suggested that the US government take drastic action, not only by sanctioning the Iranian economy, but also by striking Iran. Interestingly, he also included religious rhetoric in his suggestion to attack Iran. He concluded that the US will be blessed by God by attacking Iran (Frykholm, 2008).

During the fourth CUFI Annual Summit held in July 2009, CUFI arranged for its 4,000 participants to visit Capitol Hill and to meet their congressmen. The meeting was to lobby the congressmen to co-sponsor two legislations, the Iran Sanctions Enabling Act and the Iran Refined Petroleum Act, both of which would impose economic sanctions on Iran. According to the CUFI website, because of the visits, the Iran Sanctions Enabling Act<sup>1</sup> has received 22 new co-sponsors and the Iran Refined Petroleum Act<sup>2</sup> has obtained 18 new co-sponsors (“Overview of the 2009 CUFI summit,” 2009). In addition, CUFI also urged its activists and American citizens to sign a petition calling for the indictment of the Iranian president, Ahmadinejad. The petition accused Ahmadinejad of “incitement to genocide” and suggests that the United Nations bring Ahmadinejad to the International Criminal Court and put him on trial under the Genocide Convention. It states that:

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has a clear record of incitement to genocide as defined under the Genocide Convention and its application to date. He has sought to dehumanize Israelis and demonize Jews. He has repeatedly called for Israel’s destruction in direct and stark terms. He is getting close to acquiring the nuclear arms with which to make good on this genocidal threat. And, through his active support of Hezbollah and Hamas, he has clearly demonstrated that he is prepared to turn his talk of killing Israelis into deadly action (“Prosecute Ahmadinejad,” 2009).

Soon after the petition appeared on CUFI’s website in September 2009, it was reported that within 24 hours, the petition obtained more than 10,000 signatures (Fingerhut, 2009).

In September 2009, a group who claimed themselves as “Christian Leaders for a Nuclear-Free Iran” which comprised some leaders of Evangelical Christians and Roman Catholic groups in the United States, sent a letter to Congress and other key world leaders calling them to take a drastic action to stop the Iranian government from developing its nuclear weapon. They argued that the capability of Iran

to obtain nuclear weapons will destabilize the Middle East and lead to a new arms race in the region. The letter, which begins with its summary of Iran's undemocratic policies, the intention of the Iranian president to wipe Israel off the world map and its denial of the Holocaust, states: "A nuclear-armed Iran is almost certain to initiate an arms race with other Middle Eastern and Arab nations which have reasons to fear the religious, political and military ambitions of Iran's extremist leaders. As the world's leading state sponsor of international terror, we must assume Iran will sell or give nuclear weapons to extremist groups that are declared and demonstrated enemies to America and her allies." In addition, the letter accuses Iran of being the main funder for Hezbollah and Hamas in Lebanon and Gaza, and urges the United States to impose, among others, a total arms embargo on Iran and apply economic sanctions to any foreign companies that: export refined petroleum products including gasoline from Iran; provide ships or shipping services to transports such products; underwrite those shipments; or finance or broker those shipments; or help maintain Iran's domestic refining capacity ("Christians leaders call for urgent action," 2009).

## **Conclusion**

The American Evangelical Christians formed an important lobbyist bloc of support for the State of Israel as early as the latter's establishment in 1948. This support became more visible after the Six Days War in 1967 as the Christians saw the victory of Israel as evidence that God had fulfilled "his divine plan" for the imminent return of Jesus Christ. This belief shaped the activism of the American Evangelical Christians movements, particularly the Christians United for Israel (CUFI) in exerting its religious belief on American foreign policy in the Middle East relating to Israel, and showing their critical response to any American foreign policies that were negative towards Israel. The American Evangelical Christians theological beliefs and values provide their members with a strong sense of direction and policy stances not only to the issues in the US, but also to the international issues. As a Republican leader commented on the American Evangelical Christians pro-Israel policy: "They are very vocal and have shifted the centre of gravity towards Israel and against concessions. It colours the environments in which decisions are being made" (Zunes, 2004, p. 2). This study shows that although

the activities of the Christian United for Israel are strongly based on the dispensationalist theological beliefs, the arguments and ideas behind its ideologies were presented in a very nationalistic, secular and pragmatic vein. However, we contend that the end-time theological beliefs could possibly explain the reason for their unequivocal support for Israel. Truly, it is never easy to determine objectively to what extent the religious beliefs of the American Evangelical Christians have contributed to US foreign policy decision making towards support for Israel. Therefore, this study suggests that the American Evangelical Christians' interest groups such as CUFI is not only far from being a key player in the foreign policy decision making process, but was rarely able to determine the success of their lobbies. Although CUFI was capable of having some impact on foreign policy proposals, its role is rather weak in determining whether the proposed foreign policy is successful or not. Nevertheless, the critical role of this religious interest group lobbies in putting pressure on some areas of American foreign policy towards Israel cannot be denied. Its role has been increasingly recognized by foreign policy analysts as an important and legitimate force that potentially influences foreign policy making.

## **Endnotes**

1. The bill H.R. 1327: Iran Sanctions Enabling Act of 2009 is to authorise state and local governments to direct divestiture from, and prevent investment in, companies with investment of \$20,000,000 or more in Iran's energy sector, and for other purpose. It was introduced in 5 March 2009 and was sponsored by Rep. Barney Frank (d-MA4) and obtained 257 co-sponsors. It was passed in the House in 14 October 2009 with 414 Ayes, 6 Nays and 12 Present/Not Voting.

2. The bill H.R.2194: Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act of 2009 is to amend the Iran Sanctions Act of 1996 to enhance United States' diplomatic efforts with respect to Iran by expanding economic sanctions against Iran. It was introduced in 30 April 2009 and was sponsored by Rep. Howard Berman (D.CA28) and obtained 336 co-sponsors. On 28 October 2009, the bill was considered by the committee and was recommended to be considered by the House.

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