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Christian Zionism, the US, and the Middle East

A Sketch and Brief Analysis

Mark Finney

THERE IS AN INTERESTING question as to why the US is so attached to present-day Israel. For this great economic, military, and political superpower appears to gain little from their close relationship and yet stands shoulder-to-shoulder in rejecting numerous UN Security Council resolutions against Israel, in supporting the country economically to the tune of billions of dollars per annum, in sharing sensitive intelligence, in selling their most high-tech, sophisticated military hardware, and in making it clear to all that they will safeguard any security issues that Israel may have. And yet the US gets nothing in return. Indeed, all of the Middle Eastern foreign policy objectives of the US could be, and have been, secured outside of this close relationship. Whether establishment of close ties elsewhere (e.g., Saudi Arabia, other Gulf states, Pakistan, Turkey) or military incursions (e.g., Afghanistan, Iraq), these were all undertaken with little cognizance of their relations with Israel. Indeed, the US economic (and hence, political) importance of Saudi Arabia appears to be of greater value than its relationship with Israel.¹ There is also the question of the Palestinians and a Palestinian state, to which continued Israeli intransigence perpetuates continued unrest amongst the Muslim nations of the Middle East and which leaves the US in the unenviable position of having to both defend Israeli actions whilst attempting rapprochement with the Islamic world. To paraphrase a question posed by John le Carré in his analysis of the US and the Middle East: is America's close relationship with Israel "mad"?²

¹ Note the provision made for members of the Saudi royal family to fly out of the US shortly after 9/11 when all other flights were grounded. On this see, Craig Unger, *House of Bush, House of Saud: The Secret Relationship between the World's Two Most Powerful Dynasties* (New York: Scribner, 2004), esp. 247–69.

² John le Carré, "America Gone Mad," *Sunday Times*, Jan 15, 2003, available at <http://www.snopes.com/rumors/lecarre.asp>.

The answer to le Carré's question is, of course, no! But it is not an answer that can be found in any political, economic, or military analysis; it is rather, to be found in ideology—more specifically, an ideology set within a framework of Christian discourse and the central role that Israel and the Jewish people play there. More specifically, it is the influence that Zionism and Christian Zionism have exerted upon the US psyche over the course of the past few centuries. This paper will undertake a brief analysis of Zionism and Christian Zionism in the US over this period in order to explicate the reasons for the close US-Israel ties and how this has manifested itself within US foreign policy and the Middle East (and specifically, the Israeli-Palestinian dispute).

Early Years

The influence of biblical paradigms on the US, which began in the eighteenth century (although they evolved more significantly throughout the nineteenth century), had its origins in the seventeenth-century European Puritan movement and the “Great Migration” to America of over 20,000 Puritans in the years after 1630. This marks the beginning of the influence of various biblical traditions on US society that survive to the present. For the Puritans, the move to a *New World*, a *New England*, was seen as divinely inspired; they were the new Chosen People, a new Israel escaping the sinful secularism of Western Europe for the Promised Land. Their Exodus model prompted similarities between their own experiences and those of the ancient Israelites and they believed that their future success and prosperity would be incumbent upon their commitment and responsibilities to God. Such reflections were observed in attitudes towards the indigenous American Indians who were seen as idolatrous and uncivilized—the equivalent of the biblical “Canaanites.” In later US thinking, the Indians were to be colonized and converted, or else, like the ethnic cleansing found in the biblical book of Joshua, annihilated. Some of this early “psychology” of religious chosenness has remained to the present.³

The story of the US and Zionism proper (in all its various forms), begins as early as the second US President John Adams (1797–1801), who desired the Jews to be back in their historic homeland and function, once again, within an independent state. From this period on, Gentile Zionists were certain that the return of Jews to Palestine was a central function of biblical prophecy and that this would add significant impetus to what was seen, in apocalyptic perspective, as the impending End Times (that is, the return of Christ, judgment, and the conflagration of the world).⁴ In a wider sense however, US advocacy of Zionism was also perceived as part of a more holistic programme of

³ See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *America, Amerikkka: Elect Nation and Imperial Violence* (London: Equinox, 2007); on the Puritans see esp. 17–32. Also, Robert Jewett and John S. Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003); Shawn Kelley, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (Biblical Limits; London: Routledge, 2002).

⁴ Although Adams's hope was that, “Once restored to an independent government and no longer

global transformation through the spread of Christianity and with it the moral and religious ideals of the US. Such attitudes and apocalyptic fervour became more widespread following the US Civil War (1861–65). Walter Mead notes of this period,

Books and pamphlets highlighting the predicted restoration of the Jews and speculating on the identity and the return of the “lost tribes” of the ancient Hebrews were perennial bestsellers, and the association between Dwight Moody, the country’s leading evangelist, and Cyrus Scofield, the important Bible scholar, put the future history of Israel firmly at the centre of the imagination of conservative American Protestantism.⁵

In 1891, US Zionists were able to motivate hundreds within the nation’s business and political elite in an attempt to persuade President Benjamin Harrison (1889–93) to pressure the Ottomans to return Palestine to the Jews. The impetus of such action was made by Christian fundamentalists such as Methodist evangelist William Blackstone. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, the League of Nations made Palestine a part of the British mandated territories⁶ and, from a US perspective, relations with Palestine over the following twenty-four years were largely governed by the Anglo-American Convention established in 1924, in which the US, as a non-member of the League, simply approved the decision to make Palestine a mandated territory and the choice of the British government as the mandatory power. The US adopted a form of the Balfour Declaration,⁷ although the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs, in accordance with its isolationist policy, added the qualification that “our moral interest... commits us to no foreign obligations or entanglements.” Subsequently, “a see-saw pattern emerged, whereby the official, basically neutral American policy was periodically

persecuted they would soon wear away some of the asperities and peculiarities of their character and possibly in time become liberal Unitarian Christians.” Cited in Walter R. Mead, “The New Israel and the Old: Why Gentile Americans Back the Jewish State,” *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 4 (2008), 31. A different form of Zionism which appealed to a broad range of religious and secular gentiles through a less literal interpretation of the biblical texts was known as “progressive Zionism.” There was also the influence of the Christadelphian movement in the early nineteenth century, which preceded Jewish Zionism as a political movement and which saw the necessity of securing British agreement in any attempt to restore the Jews to Palestine.

⁵ Mead, “The New Israel,” 32. He also notes that instruction in biblical Hebrew was mandatory for much of early US history at major universities such as Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Columbia, and Dartmouth. James Madison (1751–1836; president, 1809–17; father of the US Constitution and Bill of Rights), for example, completed his studies at Princeton but remained an extra year to study Hebrew.

⁶ On the basis of the British statement of policy issued in the Churchill White Paper of July of that year. See Margaret Arakie, *The Broken Sword of Justice: America, Israel and the Palestine Tragedy* (London: Quartet Books, 1973), 12. Winston Churchill was the Minister responsible for the Colonial Office at that time, the Department which issued the document.

⁷ Their own resolution reads: “Resolved by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the United States in Congress assembled, that the United States of America favors the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish people, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of Christian and all other non-Jewish communities in Palestine, and that the Holy Places and religious buildings and sites in Palestine shall be adequately protected.”

interrupted by expressions of sympathy for Zionist goals as a result of vigorous Zionist pressure.”⁸

The convention of 1924 in fact came about as a result of pressure by American business firms for equal commercial opportunities in the mandated territories of the Middle East. The US had already secured an approximately 25% share in the Iraq Petroleum Company for a number of American oil companies and was attempting to secure further concessions from France and Britain, the two central mandatory powers in the region, in order that there would be no discrimination against US business interests. “These conventions later enabled American oil interests to consolidate and dramatically expand their foothold in the region.”⁹

During the 1930–40s, US Zionists made a concerted effort to enlist the support of clergy and political leaders to their cause. The American Palestine Committee (APC) was established in 1932, advocating the “reunion of the Jewish people with the land of its ancient inheritance.”¹⁰ By 1942 it had 67 senators, 143 congressmen, 22 governors, and numerous jurists, educators, clergymen, publishers, editors, writers, and civic leaders on its membership.¹¹ In the same year (1942), a group of Christian Zionists organized themselves into the Christian Council on Palestine (CCP), their aim being to co-opt US clergymen to their cause.¹² By 1946 it had a membership of some 3,000 Christian leaders and prominent clergymen. A huge fillip for American Zionists came in 1942 when a conference held in Biltmore Hotel, New York ended by unanimously adopting a declaration insisting that “Palestine be established as a Jewish Commonwealth.”¹³ This became known as the Biltmore Program and in 1943 was adopted at the American Jewish Conference of some sixty-five Jewish organizations. As a result of growing support for the Zionist cause, both the Democratic and Republican platforms in 1944 came out in favour of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine.¹⁴ Harry Truman, who had been supportive of this movement, became President in 1945 (–53).

⁸ Arakie, *Broken Sword*, 13.

⁹ Arakie, *Broken Sword*, 14. In 1929, violence in Jerusalem led to two commissions of inquiry and the traditionally pro-Zionist Labour government in Britain published the Passfield White Paper which contained a number of declarations: that there was no further land available for agricultural settlement by Jews; that a more stringent immigration policy was necessary; and that a scheme was to be introduced to ensure the rights of Palestinian tenants to subsistence plots. Critically, it also announced that the British government held that the obligations laid down in the mandate with regard to the two sections of the population were of equal weight. Thereupon a political storm erupted. However, when a Zionist delegation appealed for US intervention, the sharp response of Henry Stimson, the Secretary of State, was that his duty was to protect United States citizens, not the Zionist movement.

¹⁰ Paul C. Merkley, *The Politics of Christian Zionism, 1891–1948* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1998), 132. The APC was established at the instigation of Emanuel Neumann, an active US Zionist.

¹¹ So, Irvine H. Anderson, *Biblical Interpretation and Middle East Policy: The Promised Land, America and Israel, 1917–2002* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 77.

¹² Encouraged by Neumann.

¹³ See Anderson, *Biblical Interpretation*, 80 (and see the bibliography on p. 154).

¹⁴ The Democratic platform, adopted in July 1944, stated: “We favour the opening of Palestine to unrestricted Jewish immigration and colonization, and such a policy as to result in the establishment there of a free and democratic Jewish Commonwealth.”

1945–48

Despite the earlier role that the US played in its support of Israel, the general attitude following the end of the Second World War was, once again, one of isolationism. A bill passed in 1947 had taken an anti-immigrant stance, although it did allow for a small number of refugees or settlers. Within the Jewish community the only group that lobbied for making use of the bill was the (anti-Zionist) American Council for Judaism, not the Zionists; the Zionist leadership in Palestine specifically asked them to refrain as they wanted European Jews to go to Palestine. American Jewish Zionists were also reluctant to favour immigration of European Jews who, it was thought, may undermine the reputation of American Jewry. Instead, European Jews were channelled towards Palestine despite the will of the overwhelming majority, who simply wanted to go home or go to the US.¹⁵

As the influx of Jews into Palestine fomented friction and conflict, Britain announced that it would give up its Mandate on February 18, 1947 and defer the issue to the newly formed United Nations who proposed a separation of the land into two states. In the following year, as Mead relates,

on May 12, 1948, Clark Clifford, the White House chief counsel, presented the case for US recognition of the state of Israel to the divided cabinet of President Harry Truman. To substantiate the Jewish territorial claim, Clifford quoted Deuteronomy: “Behold, I have set the land before you: go in and possess the land...”¹⁶

On May 14, and against the advice of his diplomatic and military advisors, Truman gave de facto recognition to the newly declared state of Israel (just eleven minutes after Israel’s declaration of independence). His prompt decision may have been a combination of his Christian background together with the power of the Jewish community in the US.¹⁷ Certainly, for the tightly fought 1948/49 presidential election, having the Jewish vote (and the campaign contributions of Jews or sympathizers), together with the cooperation of the media (support for Israel was popular throughout the US), were

¹⁵ Yosef Grodzinsky, *In the Shadow of the Holocaust: The Struggle Between Jews and Zionists in the Aftermath of World War II* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2004), notes that 65% wanted to return home, 20% wanted to go to the US, and 15% wanted to go to Palestine (41). The same goes for later Russian immigration to Israel. The later government of Menachem Begin (1977–83) arranged with Moscow that Jewish emigrants would be given only one choice of destination, that is, Israel (via Vienna or Berlin).

¹⁶ Mead, “The New Israel,” 28.

¹⁷ Harry Truman (1884–1972) was a staunch, lifelong student of the Bible. He joined the Baptist Church at 18. From his reading of the Old Testament he felt the Jews derived a legitimate historical right to Palestine (often citing Deut 1.8, “Go and take possession of the land”). This was important when the US took the decision to recognize the state of Israel in 1948. See Anderson, *Biblical Interpretation*, 87. The swift response was probably also made to undermine Soviet (and so Communist) influence upon the new State.

factors of significant importance.¹⁸ After leaving office in 1953, and reflecting on his decision to give prompt recognition to the State of Israel, Truman was quoted as saying, “I am Cyrus. I am Cyrus.”¹⁹

From 1967–

Social upheavals in the US during the 1960s and 70s²⁰ aroused concern that the nation was descending into moral decay.²¹ This not only stimulated religious revivalism into the direction of conservative and fundamentalist Christianity, but also led to such groups becoming more politically involved. This is also true of the media image of successive US Presidents: since Jimmy Carter (1977–81) every presidential candidate has felt it necessary to profess either openly, or at least subtly, some form of religious adherence. Indeed, Ronald Reagan (1981–89), who embraced the ideas preached to him by Christian fundamentalists Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson (a Republican presidential candidate in 1988), saw his primary responsibilities as President to include a military build to equip the US in preparation for the battle of Armageddon. According to Charles Fischbein, a central figure in the Israeli lobby, Reagan and his attorney general Edwin Meese were actively praying for Armageddon to begin during his presidency.²²

For Bill Clinton it was important to be seen every week singing in his local Baptist church. George W. Bush was an openly committed Christian, and even Barack Obama, not renowned for openly discussing his religious beliefs, has taken the opportunity in an interview with the Washington National Cathedral magazine to declare that at the end of the day, “God is in control.”²³ In a directory of religious affiliation of members of Congress in 1999, 87% of Senate members and 91% of members of the House of

¹⁸ But Truman’s support for Israel was wildly popular throughout the US. A Gallup poll in June 1948 showed that almost three times as many Americans sympathized with the Jews as with the Muslims.

¹⁹ Anderson, *Biblical Interpretation*, 87. Cyrus was the Persian emperor who authorized the return of the Jews from Babylonian captivity to Palestine in 538 BCE.

²⁰ E.g., Vietnam (and the ensuing anti-war rallies), Watergate, and the global economic crisis of the 1970s.

²¹ The 1970s saw a severe reaction against the social and economic programs enacted under Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society that benefited the majority of the population. Starting with the breakdown of the international economic order, known as the Bretton Woods system, capital became increasingly deregulated and neoliberal programs were instituted that caused much of the population difficult social and economic conditions.

²² Ronnie Dugger (“Does Reagan Expect a Nuclear Armageddon?” *Washington Post* [April 18, 1984], C1, C4) cites a conversation between Reagan and AIPAC director Tom Dine, during which Reagan was quoted as saying, “You know, I turn back to your ancient prophets in the Old Testament and signs foretelling Armageddon, and I find myself wondering if—if we’re the generation that’s going to see that come about. I don’t know if you’ve noted any of those prophecies lately, but believe me, they certainly describe the times we’re going through.”

²³ Quoted in James Nye, “‘God is in control’: Obama gets really religious in new interview (with the election a little over two months away),” *Daily Mail*, August 22, 2012, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2191840/Obama-gets-really-religious-new-interview-election-little-months-away.html>.

Representatives had some affiliation to Christian denominations.²⁴

Since 1967, while liberal support for Israel has gradually waned, conservative support has grown. An important factor leading to increased US support for Israel since this time is the significant increase in prophetic Zionism, with evangelical and fundamentalist US Christians more interested in biblical prophecy and Israel's role in the lead-up to the apocalypse than ever before.²⁵ The speed and decisive nature of Israeli victory in 1967 looked miraculous to many Americans and Israel's capture of the Old City of Jerusalem meant that after nearly 2,000 years, the Temple site was back in Jewish hands. The sense that the end of time was approaching was a powerful impetus for the American religious revivals that began during this period. Since then, a series of best-selling books, fiction and non-fiction alike, have catered to the interests of millions of Americans in the possibility that the End Times as prophesied in the Bible was now unfolding in the Middle East.²⁶

The influence of the Christian Zionists and the pro-Israeli Jewish lobby on Washington has seen successive US administrations be perhaps less-than-impartial in dealings with the Israelis and Palestinians. For instance, for decades the US has turned a blind eye to the growth of settlements in the West Bank.²⁷ For the Israelis, the principle appears to have been to work by stealth and piecemeal; that is, to take Palestinian land bit-by-bit until they have what they want. According to Noam Chomsky,

that's been the deeply rooted principle all along. Ben-Gurion is reported to have said, 'It doesn't matter what the goyim [Gentiles] think, it matters what the Jews do.' The US pretends it doesn't know about it, but they do, as they're funding it.²⁸

In terms of funding, since 1976 Israel has been the largest single recipient of US foreign assistance and since 1985 has received over \$3 billion annually. Between 1949 and 1995, US aid to Israel amounted to \$65 billion.

²⁴ See the table in Anderson, *Biblical Interpretation*, 111.

²⁵ The rise of closer US-Israel ties in the 1960s was also a result of Arab nationalism, which managed to force the US (militarily) out of Saudi Arabia (the dismantling of the US military base in Dhahran was seen as a severe blow). Arab nationalists took over Iraq, Algeria, and later Libya, which increased the importance to Washington of Israel as a regional watchdog and a US force by proxy. During the 1967 war, Israel subdued two US enemies: Nasser and the Syrians.

²⁶ E.g., the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins (Tyndale House Publishers, 1995–2007); Hal Lindsey and Carole C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

²⁷ The peak year was Clinton's last year—Clinton-Barak's last year—2000.

²⁸ Noam Chomsky and Gilbert Achcar, *Perilous Power: The Middle East and US Foreign Policy, Dialogues on Terror, Democracy, War, and Justice* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007), 179. The various proposals since have been just various modifications of the Alon Plan, which is: we take it step by step. Moshe Dayan (in charge of the occupation under the Labor Government from 1967–74) said the same: "We'll take little bits at a time... piece by piece, quietly; we will tell the Palestinians, "We have no solution, you shall continue to live like dogs, and whoever wishes may leave, and we will see where this process leads" (cited in Chomsky and Achcar, *Perilous Power*, 179–80).

Christian Zionism

Dispensationalist theology and Armageddon thinking (which holds to a determinative end-time scenario) has been popularized by influential evangelical ministers such as Robertson, Falwell, and Billy Graham and institutes such as Dallas Theological Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, and the Moody Bible Institute. Studies made between 1996 and 2006 demonstrate that approximately one in ten US voters saw themselves as Zionists or dispensationalist Christians. Rammy Haija notes,

The Christian Zionist lobby has targeted both voting pools to assemble a pro-Israel constituency among American voters through the promotion of biblical and dispensationalist doctrine.... They are an instrumental actor in a pro-US policy towards Israel. This position has been especially solidified among the powerful elites in US policy. Jewish-American leaders saw links with Christian Zionists as an advantageous and a useful influential political bloc.²⁹

Christian Zionists justify their support for Israel through a literal reading of the Hebrew Bible, including texts such as Gen 12.3, “I will bless those who bless you, whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” As such, many Christians feel compelled not only to embrace Israel as a premise of faith but also to secure the ongoing blessing and prosperity of the nation. A further tenet of Zionist and Christian Zionist ideology, as noted above, is based on dispensationalist theology which maintains the present time is the last era of the apocalyptic scenario of the end times and that the return of Christ as judge and messiah is contingent upon a certain set of events: critically, that the state of Israel must be in existence. Many Christian Zionists are more ardent than a great number of Israelis and overtly promote the annexation of the lands of the West Bank. Haija notes,

During the inaugural Christian Zionist Congress conference (Jerusalem 1985) a resolution calling for the total annexation of the West Bank passed unanimously among the Christian voters at the conference. While Jewish groups in the US and Israel vehemently oppose any sort of religious alliance with Christian Zionists they have accepted a political alliance as it creates another strong-arm for Israeli interests within US policy.³⁰

So, too, evangelical ministers such as Falwell and Robertson regularly called for a more aggressive stance of Israel towards the Palestinians.

Such attitudes were evident during the presidency of George W. Bush (2001–2009). Fundamentalist Christian Jerry Falwell met regularly with Bush during his first term in

²⁹ Rammy M. Haija, “The Armageddon Lobby: Dispensationalist Christian Zionism and the Shaping of US Policy Towards Israel-Palestine,” *HLS* 5, no. 1 (2006), 75–76.

³⁰ Haija, “Armageddon Lobby,” 85.

office to urge for greater US support for Israel. During an interview for the CBS News programme *60 Minutes* in October 2002, Falwell made the claim that “I think now we can count on President Bush to do the right thing for Israel every time.”

If true, such statements undermine any US credibility concerning its claim to act as an impartial influence in respect of the various complex issues of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Indeed, Christian Zionists have also been publicly vocal that the US should neither support Palestinian goals or aspirations nor promote the Roadmap, which would culminate in some form of a Palestinian state. Conversely, they argue that Israel should have sole sovereignty over the entire land, including Palestinian territories.

During the same interview, Falwell made provocative statements not only about Palestinians, but about Islam as a whole, claiming that Muhammad was a terrorist and that Islam was satanic.³¹ Falwell noted, “If there’s one thing that brings us together quickly [US evangelical Christians] it’s whenever we begin to detect our government becoming a little anti-Israel.”³² According to Falwell, the President’s views on Israel were consistent with those of his own.

Impact of Christian Zionism on US Foreign Policy

The White House’s responses to various Israeli incursions into the West Bank (April 2002) and Gaza (2008–9; 2014) demonstrate the influence that Christian Zionists have on US foreign policy regarding the Middle East.³³ In 2002, with international outcries and condemnation of the Israelis and pressure focussed upon President Bush and his administration, which the international community viewed as the only influence that could halt this destruction, Bush appealed to Israeli Prime Minister Sharon to cease the Israeli actions. While Sharon responded with the usual claims of justified Israeli self-defence, what was startling was the response of the US Christian Right. Donald Wagner noted,

The Pro-Israel lobby, in coordination with the Christian Right, mobilized over 100,000 e-mail messages, calls and visits urging the President to avoid restraining Israel. The tactic worked. The President uttered not another word of criticism or caution, and Sharon continued the offensive.³⁴

So, too, Bush’s initial endorsement of the Roadmap in 2003 led to criticism and heavy pressure from Christian Zionists who organized some 50,000 postcards to be

³¹ Jerry Falwell and Bob Simon, interviewer, “Zion’s Christian Soldiers,” *60 Minutes*, CBS, Oct 3, 2002.

³² Cf. National Council of Churches’ statement, “Resolution Refuting and Condemning the Statements concerning Islam and the Prophet Muhammad Made by Rev. Jerry Falwell on ‘60 Minutes,’” Oct 7, 2002, <http://www.nccusa.org/news/02news86.html>.

³³ According to Donald Wagner, these incursions are considered one of the “decisive moment[s] in the forging of this [contemporary] alliance”: “Marching to Zion: The Evangelical-Jewish Alliance,” *Christian Century* (June 2003), 20–24.

³⁴ Wagner, “Marching to Zion,” 20–24.

sent to the White House opposing the plan. Significantly, Bush began to subtly withdraw his previous support for the Roadmap.³⁵ The tragedy of Zionist and Christian Zionist influence on US foreign policy in the Middle East is that it foments and accentuates divisions and violence in Israel/Palestine, undermines international law and justice, undermines any thoughts of US integrity, and even stands opposed to the wishes of the majority of Israeli citizens who are open to disengagement from the West Bank in exchange for peace. As Haija notes,

While much of the world shamefully watched as Palestinians suffered, through the collective punishment of incursions and devastation, Christian Zionists benignly supported Israeli military action and used their influence to extend it. It is apparent that through the influence of the Christian Zionist lobby, Israeli objectives can be achieved despite international law and outcry... Christian Zionists are among the most fanatical advocates for the proliferation of settlements in the West Bank and increased violence against Palestinians. However, Christian Zionism is deaf to the desires of the people which its influence impacts, and does not advocate measures of peace, but rather it seeks the justification of all Israeli action under any pretense and by any means necessary.³⁶

At the same time, the Christian Zionists and, more broadly, the Christian Right in the US have fomented the doctrine of various apocalyptic end-time scenarios whereby the return of Christ is incumbent upon Israel having possession of what is regarded as the first-century-CE geographical area of the biblical land. Naturally, such attitudes are not conducive to any form of lasting peace.

The Current State of Play and Possible Future Developments

President Barack Obama is under the same pressure as previous Presidents to conform to a Christian Zionist worldview, particularly in respect to the Middle East and the Israel-Palestinian dispute. Prior to taking office, his election campaign trumpeted a change in attitude towards many aspects of foreign policy. Not only would he normalize relations with Cuba, but Guantanamo Bay would be closed and his administration would move ahead with the Israel-Palestine Roadmap. Yet all have largely come to nothing. Instead, the US finds itself yet again embroiled in further military combat operations in the Middle East as it seeks to degrade and destroy the Islamist group Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria.

Within a broader framework, US hegemony in the Middle East could now be said to be precariously balanced, despite perceptions of its own presence and role in the region

³⁵ Another example would be the US's condoning of Israel's aerial assassinations of Palestinian leaders.

³⁶ Haija, "Armageddon Lobby," 93.

as all-powerful and beneficent.³⁷ Its demise is certainly evident with the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001/2003, for these can only be seen as constituting marked failures. Withdrawal from Afghanistan was made without any strategic goals being achieved (even the killing of Osama bin Laden cannot be trumpeted as having taken place on Afghan soil and so, in some senses, justifying the invasion), and, as violence continues in parts of Iraq, the only apparent advantage for the US of the invasion is the securing of key oil reserves (though that, in itself, is not to be understated).³⁸

As such, the political cost for the US has been huge—the increased boldness of other regional actors can only be detrimental to perceptions of US power and authority: Iran continues to be provocative despite the apparent rapprochement with the international community over its nuclear ambitions;³⁹ Israel remains unmoved over the Roadmap and towards Obama’s insistence on a settlement freeze; and current Russian military action in Syria in support of President Assad all demonstrate, particularly to other Middle Eastern states, the fragility of regional US hegemony.

Certainly, there is marked nervousness within the White House. Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, most critical observers appear assured that the Taliban will return. If so, the war will have achieved no purpose and will have been a public-relations disaster for the US (no matter how much media-spin they are able to create). At the same time the current crisis regarding Syria presents an acute dilemma for the US. Does it continue to insist on political change and the removal of Assad—a position which may open the door to the potential rise of Muslim conservatism in the years ahead and, with it, possibilities of increased political or even militant rhetoric against Israel—or does it remain a muted bystander as events unfold apparently beyond its control? So, too, Iran remains a major concern particularly with the bullish Israeli stance on the pressing need for continued wariness over Iranian nuclear ambitions. All of these place the White House under sustained diplomatic pressure.

Hence, in respect of US foreign policy and the Middle East, Obama’s two terms in office have moved from its beginnings of a sense of energized enthusiasm to ending with a hesitant whimper. In terms of Israel, the Christian Zionists are ebullient over the stalling of the Roadmap and inert actions against continued Israeli settlement building on occupied lands; in terms of the wider Middle-East, the tougher US line on militant Islam may well be amongst the defining events in the region over the next decade.

³⁷ Gilbert Achcar, “U.S. Hegemony in the Middle East: From Peak to Adversity,” Palestine and the Uprisings: SOAS Palestine Society Annual Conference, London, March 17, 2012.

³⁸ See Michael Renner, “Post-Saddam Iraq: Linchpin of a New Oil Order,” in *The Empire and the Crescent: Global Implications for a New American Century*, ed. Aftab Ahmad Malik (Bristol: Amal Press, 2003), 650-74. On the question of Iraq, as Achcar has noted (Chomsky and Achcar, *Perilous Power*, 57), “For the US to withdraw from Iraq and not leave a client state would be an utter catastrophe.”

³⁹ Note the recent BBC article arguing that Iranian hardliners have launched a “rearguard action against President Hassan Rouhani, whom they suspect of trying to steer the country towards the West and in particular the US following the recent nuclear deal”: Kasra Naji, “Iran hardliners push back amid fears of change,” BBC, Nov 13, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-34793719>.

Whether Obama's successor will bring any marked changes, or have any greater success, waits to be seen.