

January Conference to Explore Assault on Pro-Israel Evangelicals

Evangelical Protestants are part of the backbone of American civil society. Numbering about 90 million people, these Bible-believing Christians have eclipsed mainline Protestants who comprised the Protestant establishment that ruled the roost in the United States in the decades before, during and after World War II. Many elites in the Washington-New York beltway regard evangelical Protestants with contempt, but this does not diminish their influence. Evangelicals have had a huge impact on presidential and Congressional elections since helping Ronald Reagan win the presidency in 1980.

Because evangelicals regard the Bible as a reliable expression of God's Word, they have been some of Israel's most ardent supporters in the modern era. Polling data indicates that evangelicals are more likely than American Jews to believe that God gave the land of Israel to the Jewish people. Moreover, ardent evangelical faith corresponds with higher levels of patriotism; evangelicals are more unashamedly pro-American than many other segments of American society. This helps explain why military enlistment rates are higher in the American Bible Belt than in other parts of the country, particularly the northeast.

In light of the role evangelical Protestants play in American body politic, it's no surprise they have been targeted by anti-Israel activists in both the U.S. and the Middle East.

During the early 2000s, Palestinian Christians and their allies, many of them affiliated with Sabeel, a Christian anti-Zionist organization headquartered in Jerusalem, worked to delegitimize pro-Israel evangelicals in the U.S. by portraying

them as zealots intent on engineering a showdown between Christianity and Islam. This message resonated strongly in some quarters, particularly with mainline Protestant churches that have been losing market share to evangelical churches since the mid-1960s.

Another group of Palestinian Christians, often affiliated with Bethlehem Bible College, a nondenominational school located in the West Bank, has worked with the allies in the U.S. to influence American evangelicals from the inside by holding biannual "Christ at the Checkpoint" conferences in Bethlehem every two years. At these conferences, attendees have been told that Israel is unworthy of Christian support because it is the homeland for the Jews—the people who rejected Jesus as their Messiah. Speakers at these conferences also state that evangelical support for Israel hinders efforts to proselytize in Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East.

Evangelicals have been subjected to some ugly propagandizing. The year 2010 saw the release of two anti-Zionist films which left viewers woefully unprepared to understand the violence that has taken place in the past few years.

The first movie, *With God on Our Side*, produced by Porter Speakman, Jr., allows a young Palestinian to state baldly, "We are trying to convey to the world that we are a people who really want peace." Left unexplained is the increase of rocket attacks against Israel that took place when Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip.

Another movie, titled *Little Town of Bethlehem*, produced by Mart Green, a wealthy and influential evangelical from Oklahoma, offered a similar message. In this movie, Palestinians were portrayed as desiring peace while Israelis were portrayed as a war mongering people.

The movie was a tour de force of misinformation that failed to acknowledge the violence that has led to the murder of Jews in

Jerusalem and Christians in Iraq, Syria, and closer to home for Americans, San Bernardino. Sadly enough, some young evangelicals have bought into this dishonest anti-Israel (and anti-American) narrative.

In response to the challenge of anti-Zionism in American evangelicalism, the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA) is hosting a one-day conference in Los Angeles. The conference, which will take place on Jan. 18, 2016, is titled "Evangelical Christians, Jews and Israel: Looming Threats To An Historic Friendship."

Speakers include prominent evangelical leaders such as Laurie Cardoza-Moore, founder and president of the pro-Israel group Proclaiming Justice to the Nations; Rev. Gerald McDermott, Anglican Chair of Divinity at Samford University Beeson Divinity School; and Brad Young, professor at Oral Roberts University.

Other speakers include Shadi Khalloul, a Christian citizen of Israel who also serves as a Captain in the IDF reserves, and Rabbi Yitchok Adlerstein, director of interfaith affairs at the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. The keynote speaker will be David Suissa, president of Tribe Media Corp., which publishes the *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*.

The goals of the conference are to educate both Christians and Jews about the campaign to divide evangelicals from Israel, promote awareness of the Jewish roots of Christianity, and inform people about the status of Christians in Israel.

The conference comes at a crucial time, as Islamists are murdering Jews and Christians throughout the world.

This conference is badly needed, now more than ever.

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