

Where is Israel on Evangelical Christian Voters' List of Priorities?

Seventeen Republican presidential candidates are vying for the support of evangelical Christian voters from the swing states of Ohio and Florida, to the cornfields of Iowa, to the small towns of the Deep South.

Within the varied spectrum of 2016 election issues such as the economy, immigration, and health care, do evangelicals highly prioritize candidates' positions on Israel and the Middle East?

Major evangelical leaders in America are saying, "Yes."

"Studies show us there are approximately 90 million Christians in America who consider their beliefs to be evangelical," Tony Perkins—president of the Family Research Council (FRC), a Christian education and lobbying group—told . "Of that number around 9-10 percent have what we call a 'biblical worldview,' in that they believe what the Scriptures say pertaining to Israel. That's a large number of voters who can definitely make a difference in a primary or general election."

Perkins said, "Among core evangelical voters, Israel is easily one of the top 10, maybe even the top five issues when considering who to support in a presidential primary. The Old Testament tells us that whoever blesses Israel will be blessed and it's certainly important to be on the right side of God's Word."

The reference by Perkins is to Genesis 12:3, which states, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (NIV).

In August, former Arkansas governor and GOP presidential candidate Mike Huckabee met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other leaders in Jerusalem. It was part of a decades-old ritual for Huckabee, an ordained Southern Baptist minister who has visited Israel about 40 times since the 1970s—far more than any other current presidential candidate, Democrat or Republican.

“Israel should be top-of-mind when evaluating GOP presidential candidates,” Huckabee told .

“I have known Prime Minister Netanyahu for 20 years,” he said. “I went to Israel not to seek his endorsement, but to endorse him because his voice is so important. Netanyahu leads a people who are realists. They know what it’s like to have people threaten to kill them. They take it seriously when a government (Iran) for 36 years promises to wipe them off the face of the Earth.”

While Huckabee’s Israel trip was the latest to make headlines, the FRC is organizing a Holy Land visit in October for supporters who will be joined by two GOP candidates, former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum and Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal. Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker took his first trip to Israel in May.

Two-Pronged Strategy

Political operatives say that candidates’ trips to Israel are focused on securing campaign donations from influential Israeli government and business leaders who can infuse much-needed cash and hopefully help deliver the support of pro-Israel voters back in the U.S.

But ultimately, are these visits to the Jewish state more educational or political in nature?

“Both,” said Penny Nance, CEO of Concerned Women for America, a Christian women’s activist group.

Nance, along with political strategist Ralph Reed and author Joel Rosenberg, penned an op-ed in *The Christian Post* about presidential contenders visiting Israel in the immediate aftermath of the November 2014 U.S. midterm elections. They posed seven questions that they argued candidates must answer to win the White House. The fifth question reads in part, "Does the candidate have a clear and coherent view of the U.S. vital interest in the Middle East, including a demonstrated, consistent, long-standing support for Israel and a solid understanding of why Israel matters to the U.S.?"

According to Nance, there are "a number of reasons those aspiring to win the GOP nomination need to understand and embrace Israel."

"First, visiting Israel is an educational experience in understanding their economy, security challenges, and what's important to their citizens," she told . "At the same time, you are telegraphing to evangelical voters why Israel is important and that you sincerely care about its future. Finally, you want to raise money and appeal to pro-Israel voters."

Tremendous Pool of Potential Pro-Israel Advocates

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) asserts that the evangelical Christian community plays a vital role in relations, the influential pro-Israel lobby's core priority. As such, AIPAC enlists Christian clergy to garner nationwide support for Israel, stating on its "Your Church and AIPAC" webpage that polls consistently show how support for the Jewish state "is highly related to adherence to evangelical beliefs and frequency of church attendance."

"As Christians, we should be Israel's strongest supporters and friends and we need to translate that into political activism," Rev. Philip C. Morris, Jr. argues in an AIPAC video.

AIPAC also notes the significance of evangelical support to the entire pro-Israel community by stating, “20-25 million Americans define themselves as evangelical Christians, representing a tremendous pool of potential pro-Israel advocates.”

Evangelical Perspectives on Israel and the Middle East

According to February 2014 Pew Research Center findings, a plurality of Christians (29 percent) and Jews (31 percent) say the U.S. is not supportive enough of Israel. Nearly half of white evangelical Protestants (46 percent) claim America does not provide enough support for Israel.

Notably, when Pew polled Americans in 2012 about U.S. foreign policy—specifically, what actions America should take if Israel attacks Iran to stop Iran’s nuclear program—64 percent of white evangelicals answered, “support Israel,” compared to 39 percent of the general public.

In March 2013, LifeWay Research reported that 72 percent of white evangelicals support Israel in its ongoing conflict with the Palestinians, compared to 49 percent of Americans overall. Fifty percent of white evangelicals claim Israel cannot peacefully coexist with an independent Palestinian state, compared to 33 percent of American Jews and 41 percent of the general public.

With the Iran nuclear deal garnering much public attention, most of the GOP contenders are quick to remind prospective voters of the ramifications of a country whose hostile intentions toward the U.S. and Israel are seen all too often.

“Radical Islam poses an imminent threat to national security, both in the United States and Israel,” Huckabee told . “With Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons, combined with ‘Death to America’ chants, and with a steady stream of global terrorist attacks, GOP voters understand that this toxic ideology must be defeated if we are to survive. While Russia, China, and

North Korea have more firepower, they are considerably less likely to attack us than Iran, Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and other hardline Islamists.”

Besides Huckabee, U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) is the presidential candidate who perhaps best personifies evangelical voters’ support of Israel. In Cruz’s candidacy announcement speech in March at Liberty University, the only remark to inspire a 30-second standing ovation was about Israel. Cruz declared, “Instead of a president who boycotts Prime Minister Netanyahu, imagine a president who stands unapologetically with the nation of Israel.”

Presidential candidates and evangelical voters not only care about Israel, but recognize its significance to their faith. A July poll by LifeWay reveals that 70 percent of evangelicals believe that the God of the Bible has a special relationship with the modern nation of Israel.

“No country is more intertwined with the ancient biblical narrative than Israel,” said Scott McConnell, vice president of LifeWay, “and evangelical Americans see a contemporary connection with the nation.”

Bethany Blankley contributed to this article. For the original article, visit .