

Strange Bedfellows

BY STEPHEN ZUNES

When it became clear last June that the U.S. response to Israel's attack on the Osirak nuclear reactor would be one of surprise and indignation, not approval, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin placed a call to an influential American religious leader to ask for help. The religious leader, who quickly agreed to mobilize support for the Israeli action, was neither a prominent rabbi nor a member of the "Jewish lobby"; Begin had enlisted the assistance of the Reverend Jerry Falwell.

Last year, eight fundamentalist religious leaders, including prominent media evangelists, assured Begin in writing that he could count on their support for the annexation of Jerusalem by Israel and the military occupation and colonization of the West Bank and Gaza. "We proclaim that the Land of Israel encompasses Judea and Samaria as integral parts of the Jewish patrimony, with Jerusalem as its one and indivisible capital," they wrote.

At a time when militaristic and right-wing factions in power in Israel have alienated many of that country's traditional liberal supporters in the United States, a curious alliance is being forged between Israeli leaders and America's Christian Right. Begin is gaining increasingly vocal support from Christian fundamentalists, though many of them would probably move if he decided to live next door.

Not all fundamentalist groups have joined the chorus. A few have allied themselves with overtly anti-Semitic causes and are calling for the destruction of the state of Israel. Others follow a social gospel which calls them to seek a just and peaceful settlement in the Middle East. "The history of persecution against the Jews requires that they have a homeland which they can control themselves," says John Alexander, editor of the Christian evangelical publication *The Other Side*. But "even if Israel is the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, this does not give them grounds for violence and injustice."

Stephen Zunes, a graduate student in political science in the joint doctoral program of Temple University and the Institute for Policy Studies, has traveled extensively in the Middle East.

The curious alliance between Menachem Begin and the Christian Right

Among some of the largest of the evangelical organizations, however, Begin is a hero and defending Israel is a high-priority cause. "To stand against Israel is to stand against God," says Jerry Falwell, and to suggest that the Palestinians might also have a legitimate claim to a national homeland is to defy divine will: "God's word settles the question of whose land [it is]: It is Israel's," he says. "We believe that God very clearly promised Abraham a blessing for those who bless Israel and a curse for those who curse Israel."

The Moral Majority and other right-wing organizations have condemned the National Council of Churches for the Middle East policy statement it adopted in November 1980 after years of deliberation. That statement called for negotiations between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and support for the national rights of Palestinians as well as Israelis. Declaring that the NCC was "moving towards an anti-Israel position," the Moral Majority boycotted later Council policy meetings.

Falwell has also warned that "liberal Protestant church groups . . . who are determined that there must be self-determination for the Palestinians [are] very dangerous for our Government." There are signs that anti-Catholic sentiment is being rekindled as well, because of the Vatican's support of Palestinian rights and international trusteeship of Jerusalem.

In 1980, the last thirteen foreign embassies remaining in Jerusalem withdrew to Tel Aviv in protest when the Israeli Knesset declared that all of Jerusalem and the surrounding areas constituted Israel's "eternal capital." In response, a co-

alition of fundamentalist groups founded the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem (ICEJ). The "Embassy" serves as a resource center for right-wing Christian religious and political activity in the Middle East. It has won the praise of the Israeli government and Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek; *The Jerusalem Post* has called its associates "ambassadors of friendship."

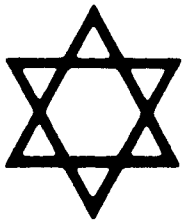
The ICEJ is located in an attractive building in a fashionable West Jerusalem neighborhood. It claims to have international support, but on a recent visit I found that the entire staff, except for the Dutch director and his Palestinian wife, seemed to be Americans. So did the visitors who came that day.

Like others on the Christian Right, the ICEJ is critical of the Christian groups which do relief work among the Arabs of East Jerusalem, the Gaza strip, and the West Bank. The American Friends Service Committee, the Mennonite Central Committee, and Catholic Relief Services are accused of fostering political resistance through their self-help projects. "Too much self-reliance independent from Israeli control could lay the foundation of an independent Palestinian state," says ICEJ Director J.W. van der Hoeven.

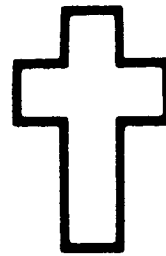
"While Christian funds stream into relief projects for Arab refugees, the plight of Israel's poor goes unnoticed," van der Hoeven told me. He spoke with pride of his group's efforts to aid the Jewish poor, and the ways in which such aid helped to free Israeli funds for military expenditures.

In the literature of the Christian Right, the PLO is often referred to as "the forces of Satan" and the vanguard of a "Moslem-Communist conspiracy." That message is transmitted, too, by many of the political evangelists who broadcast regularly to the estimated fifty million born-again Christians who identify with the New Right. Religious broadcasters own an estimated 1,400 television and radio stations, and all but a few allow extensive air-time for political evangelism. In addition, hundreds of hours are purchased every week on secular stations. The Moral Majority alone broadcasts daily over 400 radio stations. Its monthly newspaper, *Moral Majority Reports*, has a circulation of more than one million and an estimated readership of three times that number.

"Eighty thousand pastors are directly as-



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sociated with the Moral Majority network," says Cal Thomas, the group's vice president for communication. "They are then able to raise these issues with their parishioners by tying them into scripture. We are in a battle to win the hearts and minds of the American people. It is a question of whose will prevails."

In addition to the blitz from the pulpit and the print and electronic media, various fundamentalist groups sponsor Holy Land tours. Tens of thousands of Americans participate each year, and when they return they are often invited to give lectures, appear on local interview programs, write letters to the editor, and disseminate their first-hand views in various other ways. During my school years in North Carolina, a tour participant came to my public school to offer her interpretation of developments in the Middle East; my alternative perspective was harshly criticized by my teacher and classmates.

Such efforts can have significant impact: Charles Lawson, a builder in southern California, showed a film and sponsored a speaker on the Middle East for thirty of his co-workers; they were moved to build a house from donated materials, sell it for \$40,000, and give the proceeds to right-wing political activists in Israel.

Elizabeth Smith, a housewife in Houston, Texas, was inspired by the commentaries of radio evangelist Garner Ted Armstrong and others to become involved with Middle East issues. She has brought speakers to her church and encourages her fellow parishioners and friends to support U.S. military aid—including troops—for Israel. "Israel's got to be strong for the final battle," she says. "It's God's will."

Marshall Samuelson, an English professor at Liberty Baptist College in Lynchburg, Virginia, was prompted by Moral Majority literature to become a prolific writer of letters to public officials on Middle East issues. "God would punish any nation that mistreated the Jewish people," he warns.

Some American Jewish leaders have been surprisingly receptive to the support of Israel by the Christian Right. Dr. Samuel Cohen, executive vice president of the Jewish National Fund, told Falwell at a banquet in his

honor, "We're thankful that you have come and emerged as a major spokesman for religion, for religious values, and religious virtue. We're thankful that you have become a champion for better government, for morality in government, and that, on the national political scene, you have become a staunch friend of the state of Israel."

A letter from three prominent American Jewish leaders, published last December in the *Jewish Week-American Examiner*, declared that "there is far greater potential commonality of interests among Jews and the Moral Majority than there is among Jews and the National Council of Churches." Jacques Torczyner, an executive of the American sector of the World Zionist Organization and former president of the Zionist Organization of America, has said, "We have, first of all, to come to a conclusion that the right-wing reactionaries are the natural allies of Zionism and not the liberals."

The alliance is paradoxical, since fundamentalist support for Israel seems to stem less from concern for the welfare of the Jewish state than from a theology that excludes Jews. The High Adventure Ministries, which has worked closely with the Israeli government on arranging tour groups and establishing a broadcasting station in the pro-Israeli enclave in southern Lebanon, says that its mission is to "prepare the Jewish soul for the coming of the Messiah." The ICEJ also hopes to speed the Second Coming by calling on Christians to "encourage Jews to make *aliya*"—that is, to move to Israel.

The ancient and ugly stereotype of the miserly, power-grabbing Jew is alive and well among staunch right-wing supporters of Israel in the United States. The Reverend Daniel Fore, head of the Moral Majority in New York, has issued public statements on the Jews' "almost supernatural ability" to make money and their alleged control of New York City and the media. Similarly, Falwell said, in a speech on the steps of the Virginia state capitol. "A few of you here today don't like Jews. And I know why. He can make more money accidentally than you can on purpose."

One of Israel's most outspoken supporters is the Reverend Bailey Smith, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, who has stated that God does not hear the prayers of Jews. Members of the Moral Ma-

majority, who proclaim their goal is to "Christianize America," to place Christian candidates in office, and to reinstate mandatory prayer in the public schools, are also devoted supporters of Israel.

The theological explanation is straightforward enough: It rests on the fundamentalist belief that an ingathering of Jews to biblical Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth must precede the second coming of Christ. In this view, the creation of modern Israel represents the fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

But there is more: Leaders of the Christian Right also appreciate Begin's staunch anti-communism, his militarism, and his conservative stance on social and economic issues. Their support of Israel emerged most clearly after the defeat of the social democratic Labor coalition and the rise of the right-wing Likud bloc.

At a time when many Americans are acutely aware of a diminished sense of community, when the traditional family structure is under assault, when drug abuse and violence seem to be reaching epidemic proportions, Israel's bellicose militarism, by contrast, can be perceived as power and righteousness. The Jewish state appears as bastion of God's chosen people high above stormy seas.

"The United States in recent years has come across as a bumbling, stumbling giant, perceived throughout the world as not being able to do anything," says the Moral Majority's Cal Thomas. "Israel's attack on the Iraqi reactor and the Entebbe rescue mission were brilliant military operations. The United States couldn't pull something like that off; shooting down those Libyan jets was the first successful thing the U.S. military has done in years."

Thomas believes there is theological justification for Israel's continued occupation of lands taken during the 1967 war, but he also believes military justification exists: "It's just the spoils of war," he says. "You don't expect the United States to give back its land to England or the Louisiana Purchase to the French. It's the Golden Rule: Whoever has the gold rules."

That is a curious basis for defending Israel—particularly when it comes from a professing Christian. But it is by no means the only curious—even bizarre—element in the new alliance between the Jewish state and the Christian Right. ■