



Turning a Colonial Occupation into a Religious War, Exploiting Religion for Political Gains: **The Israeli Government and the Trump Administration**

The illegal US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital further confirms the apparent role of fundamentalist religious groups in the current U.S. policy and decision making. Contrary to official U.S. positions and statements that the US Administration has taken and made in the past, this decision to presumably "help the peace process move forward", represents a US violation of its international obligations. It has been largely taken to enlist further support from religious fundamentalists, mainly from Christian Evangelicals or "Christian Zionists".¹

Officials within the Trump Administration have continued to advance an extremist agenda by exploiting religion for political purposes. The US Vice President Mike Pence is a known Christian Evangelical while President Trump's Middle East team is composed of a group of hardcore religious Zionists including Ambassador David Friedman and Envoy Jason Greenblatt. An example of the use of a religious narrative is Friedman's account on the US decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital:

"Now, the United States did not make Jerusalem the capital of Israel. That was done by King David some 3,000 years ago under God's direction (...) But, I hope you will agree with me that it feels awfully good that for the first time in 2,000 years since churban bayit sheni – the destruction of the Second Temple – the most powerful and moral nation on earth has made this important recognition of the primacy of Jerusalem to the State of Israel and the Jewish People."²

This factsheet aims to highlight exploitation of religion used to justify and normalize the systematic violations of the inalienable rights of the people of Palestine.

The Balfour Declaration and the International Zionist Christian Lobby

Lord Arthur James Balfour, the author of the Balfour Declaration, was influenced by the Christian Zionist idea of facilitating the "return" of the Jews to Palestine. While British Jews were generally not very receptive to the idea of a Jewish State in Palestine; with the rejection of the Balfour Declaration by Sir Edwin Montagu, the only Jewish member of the British Cabinet, Balfour was identified as "the type of non-Jewish Zionist."³ In defense of the British decision to deny the people of Palestine of their right to self-determination, Balfour stated:

"Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs,

1 Diana Buttler Bass, "For Many Evangelicals, Jerusalem is about prophecy, not politics" May 14, 2018. <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/12/08/opinions/jerusalem-israel-evangelicals-end-times-butler-bass-opinion/index.html> last accessed on November 21, 2018

2 JPost, "Friedman: Trump has 'slayed sacred cows'", September 5, 2018. <https://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Friedman-Trump-has-slayed-sacred-cows-566520> last accessed on November 21, 2018.

3 Sharif, Regina "Christians for Zion, 1600 – 1919" in Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol. 5, No. ¾ (Spring – summer, 1976), P 135.

in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires or prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit this ancient land"⁴.

While it is not conceivable to claim that Balfour's Declaration was solely based on his religious convictions, several authors cited religion as a main influence on Balfour to personally commit to the Zionist project; just like other British officials including the British Prime Minister at the time, Lloyd George. To this end, Christian Zionists lobbied intensely not only in the UK, but also in the US, to support the Balfour Declaration⁵.

The Christian element of support for Zionism played an important role in the outreach efforts seeking to support the imposition of a Jewish State in Palestine. By June 1945, several committees of leading Jewish and Christian personalities have led the effort to present a flourishing Christian Zionist narrative referred to by prominent supporters; including in the U.S., Mexico, Colombia, Costa Rica, Bolivia, Cuba, and Chile⁶. Christian Zionists believe that God will "bless the nations that 'bless' Israel and 'curse' those nations that 'curse' it" as their literal reading of Genesis 12:3 addressed to Abraham "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you".

Traditional churches do not support this narrative and oppose this literal reading of holy books. For example, the Holy See in 1922 stated its opposition to the Balfour Declaration in the following terms:

"The Holy See does not oppose the principle that Jewish should have the same civil rights as other nationalities and religious confessions in Palestine, but cannot accept: that Jews be given a privileged and predominant position vis-à-vis other nationalities and religions; that the rights of Christian confession be insufficiently guaranteed." (Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, Holy See's Secretary of State, May 15, 1922).

Furthermore, the Christian Zionist narrative did not represent the majority of the Protestant Churches, as reflected by Rt. Rev. Rennie MacInnes, the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem at the time of the Balfour Declaration, who had opposed Zionism and supported the national aspirations of his Palestinian congregation.⁹

Case Study: Christian Zionists Marching in Jerusalem.

Every year, thousands of Christian Zionists from around the world assemble in Jerusalem to express their support to Israel. On 27 September 2018, many of them traveled from the United States, Brazil, and other countries to participate in the march. This has been prompted by their apocalyptic narrative derived from messianic belief that the unconditional support to Israel will "hasten the coming of Jesus the Messiah to earth". In the words of Pastor Elianna Caberal who participated in the march, "We are supporting and praying for Israel, because if Israel is strong, then it will help bring Jesus for the second time. We are coming because we want to bring the Lord, who is Jesus,

4 Masalha, Nur (2007) "The Bible and Zionism". Zed Books: New York. P 100.

5 Ariel, Yaakov (2006). P 79.

6 Glick, Edward "Zionist and Israeli Efforts to Influence Latin America: A Case Study of Diplomatic Persuasion", in The Western Political Quarterly, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Jun., 1956), P 330.

7 Robins, Walker "The Withdrawal from the Iran Deal signals new power player in Washington: Christian Zionists" in Washington Post, May 8, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/05/08/the-withdrawal-from-the-iran-deal-signals-a-new-power-player-in-washington-christian-zionists/?utm_term=.83c225783b90 last accessed on November 21, 2018

8 S. Ferrari "The Vatican, the Palestine question and the internationalization of Jerusalem 1918 - 1948" in Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali Vol 60, No 4 (240) (October - December 1993). P 554.

9 Goldman, Shalom "The Rev. Herbert Danby (1889-1953): Hebrew Scholar, Zionist, Christian Missionary", in Modern Judaism, Vol. 27, No. 2 (May, 2007). P 219.

to the people, to Israel¹⁰". The logic thus behind the Christian Zionist dogma is that their support to Israel will facilitate the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.

Although many religious Jews are against the messianic approach of such groups, yet many Right-Wing Jewish Zionists see this as an opportunity to fulfill their interest. In fact, both the Israeli right wing and Christian Zionists share the same interest in opposing any political settlement, which will allow for Israel to respect its obligations under international law by withdrawing from the territory it occupied, including mainly East Jerusalem.

The support of Christian Zionist organizations to Israel, whether through financial or political means, has been effectively translated into a support for the Israeli colonization and the systematic denial of the human and political rights of the Palestinian people. Financial supporters to the Israeli settlement project are American-registered organizations, who transferred hundreds of millions of US dollars with tax-exemptions.¹¹ They include for example: Christian Friends of Israeli Communities (CFOIC), the Hebron Fund, International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ) and the Christians United For Israel (CUFI).

All of these organizations provide economic support to the Israeli illegal settlement enterprise on stolen Palestinian lands. For instance, among the main objectives of the ICEJ is to "bring Jews to Israel", support the Jewish sovereignty over Jerusalem and to de-legitimize Palestinian rights¹². Additionally, to offer ongoing financial support to many expansionist colonial projects in occupied Palestine; including for instance Ariel Settlement¹³. CUFI on the other hand, claimed that they have worked towards influencing President Donald Trump to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. CUFI's website reads, "CUFI worked with President Trump to aid him in fulfilling his campaign pledge to move the US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem and recognize the Holy City as Israel's capital"¹⁴.

There is no doubt that the economic support of notable Christian charities has contributed towards encouraging the disposition of Palestinians. The ongoing settlement project in Silwan neighborhood by the right wing settler group 'Elad' is just one example.

The Role of Christian and Jewish Fundamentalism in Supporting Israel's Colonization.

The exploitation of religion for the purpose of colonization is not an exclusive phenomenon to Zionism. Various enterprises in America and Africa, particularly in Apartheid South Africa, included theological justifications. In the case of Israel, the Zionist arguments, which were based on the Bible to justify the dispossession of the Palestinian people, can be summarized as follows¹⁵:

1. The Jews are the chosen people.
2. The "covenant" (of divine origin) include an ownership of Palestine as patrimony of the Jewish people and their "descendants forever" in the Promised Land.

10 Jpost, 7000 Christian Evangelicals Parade through Capital in Annual Jerusalem March Event, Sep 27, 2018. <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/7000-Christian-Evangelicals-parade-through-capital-in-annual-Jerusalem-March-event-568185>, last accessed on November 22, 2018

11 Report by the PLO - Negotiations Affairs Department. "No Charity in a War Crime: The Case of Jerusalem." 2018.

12 ICEJ, "Israel, PA face off over Palestinian statehood", August 19, 2011. <https://int.icej.org/news/special-reports/september-showdown>, last accessed on November 18, 2018

13 See Journal of Politics & International Studies, Vol. 9, Summer 2013, page 314

14 Christians United for Israel (CUFI), <https://www.cufi.org/learn/issues/jerusalem/>

15 Haddad, H.S. "The Biblical Bases of Zionist Colonialism" in Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Summer, 1974), p 98.

3. The “occupation and settlement of this land is a duty placed collectively on the Jews to establish a state for the Jews.”

This religious characterization of the Zionist colonization of Palestine is undoubtedly a strict belief of Evangelical groups; often known as “Christian Zionists.” With their origin dating back to the seventeenth-century, those are groups of evangelical churches that would read the Bible in a literal manner; seeing the Jews of the present as the continuers of the “biblical sons of Israel”. Therefore, the “return of the Jews” to Palestine is seen as a “first step in the advancement of the messianic timetable.”¹⁶ In this context, the “return of all Jews” to Palestine would bring the “end of the days” (known as “Armageddon”).

In 2006 and in response to this narrative, the Local Heads of Churches in Jerusalem issued the following statement :

“We reject the teachings of Christian Zionism that facilitate and support these policies as they advance racial exclusivity and perpetual war rather than the gospel of universal love, redemption and reconciliation taught by Jesus Christ. Rather than condemn the world to the doom of Armageddon we call upon everyone to liberate themselves from the ideologies of militarism and occupation. Instead, let them pursue the healing of the nations!”¹⁷”

The Occupation of 1967: “Returning to the promised land”

After the occupation of 1967, the Israeli government facilitated the work of a group of Jewish fundamentalists known as “Gush Emunim” (Block of the Faithful in Hebrew) who aimed at taking over Palestinian lands to settle Jews anywhere in the occupied territory that would have “religious importance”. While they gave a biblical connotation to the settlement enterprise¹⁸, political support came from the Labor Party led Israeli government, particularly from the “Defense” Minister Shimon Peres and Deputy Prime Minister Yigal Allon. Without their support, the leaders of “Gush Emunim” believed there would not have been settlements¹⁹.

The Israeli government made use of arguments that were very popular among Christian Zionists after the occupation of 1967. For them, Israel’s expansionism and military victory represented the fulfilment of prophecies. In this context, Israel’s use of terminology such as the “promised land” would please both Christian Zionists and Jewish fundamentalists. One of the important Bible quotes that are taken literally by such groups presents the occupation of a divine mandate: “Every place where you set foot is yours. I have given it to you, as I promised Moses” (Josh. 1:3; 14:9)²⁰. Such elements were exploited early on by Israeli officials, with several references to the “indivisibility” of the “Land of Israel”. Renowned Israeli General Rafael Eitan made it clear when he stated “there is no difference between Jaffa and Nablus”²¹.

In their search towards paving the path for “Christ’s return”, the colonialist project supported by Christian Zionists is clearly in opposition with the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, let alone an independent and sovereign state. This was clearly

16 Ariel, Yaakov “An Unexpected Alliance: Christian Zionism and Its Historical Significance”, in *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Feb., 2006), P 75.

17 “The Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism” available at http://www.sadaka.ie/What_We_Do/Churches/Church_Files/THE-JERUSALEM-DECLARATION-ON-CHRISTIAN-ZIONISM.pdf last accessed in November 29, 2018.

18 Newman, David “Gush Emunim and Settlement-Type in the West Bank” in *Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1981), P 37

19 Will, Donald “Zionist Settlement Ideology and Its Ramifications for the Palestinian People” in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Spring 1982), P 39.

20 Haddad, H.S (1974) P 107.

21 Will, Donald (1982) P 48.

articulated by Menahem Begin, an Israeli war criminal and Israel's first Prime Minister (1977 – 1983), who linked the Christian Zionist movements with the official policies of the State of Israel.: "I tell you, if the Christian fundamentalists support us in Congress today, I will support them when the Messiah comes tomorrow."²²

The colonial-settlement enterprise initiated by the Israeli Labor Party in collaboration with the Jewish fundamentalists of Gush Emunim was promoted by successive Israeli governments and has intensified over time, with staunch support by Israeli leaders such as: Begin, Yitzhak Shamir and Ariel Sharon.

The current extremist Israeli government has been making use of the connection among religious radicals to advance its extremist colonization agenda. In addition to its repeated declarations on Jerusalem being the "eternal and undivided capital of the Jewish people", this government has opposed any resolutions, including at UNESCO that recognizes the Palestinian character of the cities of Bethlehem and Hebron due to its "Jewish heritage". Netanyahu has gone as far as declaring "I say to anyone who wants to uproot us from the Tomb of the Patriarchs: Except for a few years in the last century, we've been there almost 4,000 years. We will remain there forever. You cannot defeat us."²³

The linkage made by the Israeli government between the Jewish faith and colonial-settlement expansionism is detrimental for peace and clearly aims at garnering support for Israel's lingering brutal occupation of Palestine. This linkage is manifested in statements made by senior Israeli officials in this government.

The Case of Israeli Settlements in Hebron's Old City (Known as H2 area)

Part of Israel's strategy of making the occupation of Palestine irreversible is to make the lives of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza miserable and painful. Israel's illegal and coercive measures aim to grant exclusive control to the Jewish settler population in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. For example, the reality of the 40,000 Palestinian inhabitants living in the occupied old city of Hebron, known as H2, who constitute 20% of Hebron city is a clear attestation of such policies and measures

Palestinians living in H2 suffer from the consequences of Israel's culture of impunity over its policies and practices in the occupied Palestinian territory; with their lives fully controlled by a large number of Israeli Occupation Forces, allegedly taking care of the security of between 500-800 settlers living in the Old City²⁴. The implemented policies and practices by the Israeli occupying forces, along with the armed settlers, aim to forcibly transfer Palestinians from their homes. This resulted in undermining, restricting and closing one of the most flourishing neighborhoods of Hebron and turning it into a 'ghost area.'²⁵ By aiding the settlers, Israeli occupation authorities are encouraging and supporting the theft of properties, violence and attacks against Palestinians.

22 Bennis, Phyllis & Khaled Mansour "Praise God and Pass the Ammunition!": The Changing Nature of Israel's US Backers" in Middle East Report, No. 208, US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Critical Assessments (Autumn, 1998), P 43

23 Forward: "Netanyahu "Israel will remain Hebron 'forever'", December 30, 2015. Available at <https://forward.com/news/breaking-news/328278/netanyahu-israel-will-remain-forever-in-hebrons-tomb-of-the-patriarchs/> last accessed on November 25, 2018.

24 The Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH) Available at <http://www.tiph.org/hebron/> last accessed on November 29, 2018.

25 OCHA, "The Humanitarian Impact of Israeli Settlements in Hebron City", February 2018. https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/h2_fs_2018_v5_english11.pdf, last accessed on November 19, 2018

On November 2018, Israeli military announced their plan to build a new settlement in the H2 area where the Palestinian vegetable and wholesale market once stood. The vegetable market's place is located at Al-Shuhada Street²⁶ that leads to the Al-Haram Al-Ibrahimi Mosque amidst a high Palestinian populated and once vibrant area.

Israel's plan of shoving new illegal settlement in the heart of a Palestinian populated area is not a new policy but rather part of Israel's settlement ideology. Lieberman's logic of granting exclusive and superior rights to the Jewish people is a reminder to the atrocities committed back on February 25th, 1994. On that day, an Israeli settler named Baruch Goldstein entered the Al Haram Al Ibrahimi Mosque, killing 29 worshipers including men, women and children and wounding many more. Goldstein was a religious American physician who was a champion of Rabbi Meir Kahane, the founder of the violent Jewish Defense League (JDL) and Kach party. The killing rampage demonstrated the influence of Jewish fundamentalism and extremism that justifies the massacre through messianic logic.

In 2017, the Israeli military announced the establishment of a new local council for the illegal Israeli settlers in the heart of Hebron's old city (H2). This step is a continuation of Israel's attempts to normalize and legitimize its illegal presence in Hebron. This new military order will constitutionalize Israel's apartheid regime by creating an official dual system to exclusively serve the illegal Jewish settlers and to further violate the Palestinian rights and freedom of movement. It complements the ongoing illegal Israeli excavations, construction of private roads for settlers and a wall inside the Old City of Al-Khalil/Hebron, which are all detrimental to the historical heritage of Hebron's old city.

The Trump Administration: "Following King David"

President Trump has involved a number of religious fundamentalists: Jewish and Christian Zionists, in the decision making for the Middle East such as: David Friedman and Jason Greenblatt and Vice President Mike Pence, who are very close to the most radical pro-Israeli religious fundamentalist circles in the US, including CUFI that claims to be the largest pro-Israeli lobby in the US. Mike Pence, while addressing CUFI stated:

"You know, it was only 11 years ago that my friend Pastor John Hagee had the courage and the vision to unite American Christians to rally around those ancient words "for Zion's sake, I will not keep silent." And, Pastor John Hagee, I thank you for your leadership on behalf of this nation and the Jewish state of Israel."²⁷

When Pence had a special session in the Israeli Parliament, he explained the illegal US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital as a continuation of a divine promise made by God:

"The Jewish people's unbreakable bond to this sacred city reached back more than 3,000 years. It was here, in Jerusalem, on Mount Moriah, that Abraham offered his son, Isaac, and was credited with righteousness for his faith in God. It was here, in Jerusalem, that King David consecrated the capital of the Kingdom of Israel. And since its rebirth, the modern State of Israel has called this city the seat of its government. Jerusalem is Israel's capital"²⁸.

26 +972 Magazine, "Hundreds march in Hebron: 'Open segregated Shuhada Street'", February 24, 2017. <https://972mag.com/hundreds-march-in-hebron-open-segregated-shuhada-street/125424/> , last accessed on November 20, 2018

27 Mike Pence in "What People Are Saying", <https://www.cufi.org/impact/about-us/what-people-are-saying/> , last accessed on November 21, 2018.

28 Remarks by Pence to the Israeli Parliament on January 22, 2018. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-mike-pence-special-session-knesset/> last accessed on November 25, 2018.

In May 2018, during the inauguration of the illegal US embassy in occupied Jerusalem, one of the most renowned Christian Zionist leaders in the US, John Hagee, said *"Jerusalem has been the epicenter of the Jewish faith since King David danced into the city with the Ark of the Covenant over 3,000 years ago. It is the capital of the Jewish state, and I'm grateful to the President for changing American policy to finally reflect this reality."*²⁹

Religious fundamentalism and ideological commitment with the Israeli denial of Palestinian rights has been elevated to unprecedented levels during this current Trump Administration, to the extent that Ambassador Friedman denied the existence of the Israeli occupation or with Jason Greenblatt referring to the illegal Israeli colonial settlements as "symbols of coexistence". The main members of Trump's Middle East Team (Kushner, Greenblatt and Friedman) have been personally involved in supporting the Israeli colonial-settlement enterprise in Occupied Palestine, whether by funding, or in the case of Jason Greenblatt, by also being a settler himself³⁰.

In this context, the approval of Israel's "nation-state law", which incentivizes discriminatory practices based on religious origin, could not have passed by the Israeli Government without the political and ideological backing of the Trump Administration. Besides giving an exclusive right to self-determination to the Jews in all of the land controlled by Israel, it also gives exclusivity over the city of Jerusalem and promotes illegal colonial-settlements.

The law in effect seeks to legitimize the institutionalized discrimination against non-Jews. This is part of a religious fundamentalist narrative often used by Israeli officials. During a ceremony marking 50 years since Israel's illegal occupation of East Jerusalem, attended for first time by the US ambassador, the Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu said:

*"Fifty years have passed since the great victory that made a laughingstock of those who belittled us. Two thousand five hundred years ago, Sanballat the Horonite, an enemy of Judea during the period of the Return to Zion, derisively asked, 'Can they restore the stones out of the mounds of dirt, when they have been charred?' Over the generations and in our generation, we have answered this question decisively: Yes, we will restore the stones! We built a temple out of the dirt and the ash. Nehemiah built walls with these burnt stones. WE used the longing and the yearning to bring about the resurrection of Zion. Even at our most difficult moments, we promised ourselves that we would return home, and here we stand in gratification and glory, in Jerusalem – our pride and joy, our people's majesty, our eternal and united capital forever and ever."*³¹

During the opening statements of the inauguration of the illegal US Embassy in Occupied Jerusalem, the messianic narrative, which was aggressively expressed, took center stage by two of President Trump's religious envoys: Robert Jeffress and John Hagee. Hagee in his speech stated "We thank you, O Lord, for President Donald Trump's courage in acknowledging to the world a truth that was"³².

29 Christians United for Israel (CUFI), "CUFI Welcomes President Trump's Jerusalem Policy", December 6, 2017. <https://www.cufi.org/cufi-welcomes-pres-trumps-jerusalem-policy-2/> last checked in November 21, 2018.

30 Haaretz "How did an Orthodox Ex-settler Become Donald Trump's Israel Adviser?" available at <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/trump-s-israel-adviser-an-orthodox-ex-settler-1.5435692> last accessed on November 29, 2018.

31 Israel's Prime Minister's Office, "PM Netanyahu's Remarks at the Opening Ceremony Marking the 50th Anniversary of the Reunification of Jerusalem", May 21, 2017. <http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Speeches/Pages/specch50Jerusalem210517.aspx> last accessed in November 21, 2018.

32 MSNBC "Trump's other controversial pastor in Jerusalem today" available at <http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/trumps-other-controversial-pastor-jerusalem-today> last accessed in November 29, 2018.

Conclusion

The exploitation of religion for political purposes has been evident throughout the past years but alarmingly intensified during the Trump Administration, leading to the illegal decision of recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Similar arguments were also used by the presidents of Guatemala and Paraguay when announcing the illegal move of their embassies to Jerusalem³³. The use of this narrative undoubtedly turns a political conflict into a religious war.

Religious and political leaders worldwide should condemn this cynical use of religion. While several Churches have issued statements calling upon Israel not to use religion in order to justify its systematic crimes and violations, groups of Christian fundamentalists continue to incentivize Israeli crimes based on a "divine mandate". The Palestinian Kairos document, endorsed by Palestinian theologians from various denominations states:

*"Any use of the Bible to legitimize or support political options and positions that are based upon injustice, imposed by one person on another, or by one people on another, transform religion into human ideology and strip the Word of God of its holiness, its universality and truth"*³⁴.

Palestine will continue to denounce the use of religion and holy books to justify crimes and violations, and will continue to call for the implementation of international law and UN resolutions as the only way to move forward towards a just and lasting peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians and for peace in the rest of the region.

³³ Paraguay moved the embassy back to Tel Aviv after the change of the government.

³⁴ "Kairos Document" A moment of truth, a word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering" <http://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/about-us/kairos-palestine-document> last accessed in November 25, 2018.