

To evangelicals, Zionism an increasingly tough sell

Ryan Rodrick Beiler The Electronic Intifada Oslo 19 March 2015



A recent poll found a major shift away from evangelical support for Israel. (Ryan Rodrick Beiler)

While the lobby giant [AIPAC](#) wields power in Washington, evangelical Christians have long been the grassroots base of Israel advocacy in the US. But that support is eroding.

According to a National Association of Evangelicals [poll](#), forty percent of US evangelical leaders have changed their thinking about Israel over the past fifteen years.

The most common change? “A greater awareness of the struggles faced by the Palestinian people,” the survey concludes.

“One of the most important developments is that Christian voices are coming out of Palestine,” said Munther Isaac, Vice Academic Dean of Bethlehem Bible College in the occupied West Bank. “They are challenging evangelicals to be in conversation with them.”

“We’re seeing that with younger evangelicals, there is an openness because they’re very much interested in social justice issues,” Isaac told The Electronic Intifada. “They want to make a difference and they want to see their faith put in action.”

Isaac directs the biannual Christ at the Checkpoint Conference in Bethlehem. While other Palestinian Christian groups like [Sabeel](#) have been successful in reaching mostly mainline churches that tend to be more liberal, the Bethlehem conference specifically targets evangelicals.

Megan Giesecke of Dallas, Texas, was a student at Wheaton College — one of the US' foremost evangelical schools — when she attended Christ at the Checkpoint in 2012.

“Once in Palestine, I was shocked to visit Hebron with its road closures and boarded-up shops,” Giesecke said. “Right after seeing Hebron, our group met with an ideological settler from the US who told us proudly that he had a right to the land and was helping to stake the Jews’ claim.”

After experiencing Palestine firsthand, Giesecke told The Electronic Intifada, “You become aware that supporting Zionism, especially in its current military oppression, is no longer an option. And it is certainly a difficult ideology to justify by anyone who claims to follow a God of love.”

And yet [Christians United for Israel](#) (CUFI) — the largest Zionist organization in the United States, boasting a mailing list of more than two million subscribers — is attempting to justify Israel’s oppression to a justice-minded generation.

Contrasting sharply with the [Islamophobic rhetoric](#) typically employed by CUFI, they recently launched the kinder, gentler “[Israel Collective](#).” With the tagline “United for peace,” it targets millennials who “stand with the oppressed” and “love diversity” by [claiming](#) that Israel embodies Jesus’ love and compassion, “including the love of one’s enemies” by providing a safe haven for persecuted Christians and Muslims.

Eye-opening reality

Though this rhetoric might be attractive to young people, CUFI’s claims about a loving Israel do not reconcile with the reality on the ground.

“They try to portray the conflict in Palestine and Israel as a religious conflict between the Judeo-Christian tradition and Islam. Palestinian evangelicals challenge that position,” said Isaac. “Christians are persecuted in Syria and Iraq by Muslims, but in Palestine, that’s not true. Our biggest challenge as Palestinian Christians is the occupation.”

“Christian Zionism does not promote peace and totally ignores justice,” he added. “It brings the terminology of divine right into a modern conflict and tries to solve that modern conflict not by international law but by making claims on behalf of God — and how is that different from radical Islam which claims there’s a divine right to their actions?”

Isaac and Christ at the Checkpoint are not alone in their efforts to educate evangelicals. A growing number of Christian colleges and church-based groups are organizing eye-opening study tours.

“We have testimonies of people who came in very Zionist and were interested in a Holy Land trip that was sponsored by their seminary,” explained Mariano Avila of [Hope Equals](#), a group

which organizes study tours for college and seminary students. “And so we take them to show them what’s going on over there.”

“This summer was very intense,” Avila recalled. “We were there right as Brother’s Keeper [the series of raids across the West Bank in the lead-up to the attack on Gaza last summer] was ramping up, during home invasions that were happening in Bethlehem. We were terrified. We were in different Palestinian homes and knew that Israelis were knocking down doors just a few blocks away in the middle of the night.”

The hardest work

The challenge for groups like Avila’s is channeling those intense experiences into action back home.

“The power analysis that we use is that of understanding your own privilege and then using it as an ally,” said Avila. “It’s the link between your interest in a political issue, seeing it on the ground and then coming home and becoming an advocate.”

For many, that’s when the hardest work begins — talking to their families, friends, churches and campuses about what they’ve seen. It can be a tough audience.

“Again and again, the strongest force for changing hearts and minds is personal relationship to someone who has traveled over there, and eventually, personal first-hand experience in Palestine,” said Giesecke.

So far, most evangelical institutions that are open to Palestinian perspectives remain focused on education and few have taken public stands. Some mainline churches such as the [Presbyterian Church USA](#) and the [United Methodist Church](#) have divested from companies profiting from the occupation.

Or, as CUFI [puts it](#): “Some of the largest mainline Protestant denominations have turned on Israel ... Now the anti-Israel crowd is working hard to repeat this success in the evangelical world.”

Reverend Alex Awad, Isaac’s colleague at Bethlehem Bible College, is a Palestinian evangelical and an outspoken advocate for [boycott, divestment and sanctions](#). Among three thousand other Palestinian Christians, including the heads of thirteen historic churches, Awad is a signatory of the [Kairos Palestine document](#), which calls for “boycott and disinvestment as tools of nonviolence for justice, peace and security for all.”

As a result of this activism, he and his colleagues have become a target of what he characterizes as “extreme Christian Zionists who are quite radical and who are very much against what we are doing.”

But, Awad said, “they are not really very religious actually — but they are political people who use religion more or less.”

Changing minds

“There have been many Christian Zionists who are now asking to listen to the Palestinian Christian perspective,” said Isaac. “I’ve seen it even with the CUFI group. They came to Jerusalem and requested to meet with a Palestinian Christian. I spoke to them.”

Why the new interest? “They have been criticized for ignoring the Palestinian side,” Isaac explained. “In the past they purposefully ignored Palestinian Christians. Now they know they cannot pretend anymore that we do not exist.”

Awad recalled a similar invitation last summer. By the end of the talk, a member of the group said he was convinced by Awad’s presentation and asked for a show of hands of those who agreed. About a dozen out of forty people raised their hands.

“I was shocked,” said Awad. “They are followers of John Hagee and if they come to the Holy Land they’ve been a whole week with Israeli speakers,” he added, referring to the founder and chairman of CUFI.

“They have all the Israeli propaganda. As a token they brought them to the Bible college and I spoke with them for about 45 minutes. And here they are, changing their minds.”

As CUFI’s own director David Brog [recently had to concede](#) on the conservative Middle East Forum: “The days of taking evangelical support for Israel for granted are over.”

[Ryan Rodrick Beiler](#) is a freelance photojournalist and member of the ActiveStills collective. He lived in Palestine from 2010-2014. He now lives in Oslo, Norway.