



A Year After Embassy Move, U.S. Evangelicals Look for New Israel Challenge

Christian Zionists spent decades lobbying for the embassy to be relocated to Jerusalem, but now that goal has been achieved without setting the Arab world on fire, what's next on the agenda? Good question, say evangelical leaders

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WASHINGTON — It is exactly a year since the U.S. Embassy in Israel was relocated to Jerusalem, and American evangelicals are celebrating the achievement and feeling politically emboldened by it. The relocation was a high water mark for the Christian Zionists, but many are now debating what their next policy priorities should be.

The move was a campaign pledge by [Donald Trump](#) on the 2016 election trail, made in order to appeal to evangelical voters (who make up some 25 percent of the voting public in the United States). He followed through on that promise, and it was no coincidence that two evangelical pastors spoke and offered prayers at the inauguration ceremony in Jerusalem last May. So what now?

“The evangelicals were laser-focused on the idea of moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem for more than two decades,” said an Israeli official who has worked with evangelical communities. The official, who asked not to be named, explained that “the evangelicals were pushing for this long after many other pro-Israel groups had given up. I sense in conversations with people in the evangelical world today that they are very happy it happened — but some are a bit confused right now. They’re not sure what they should be focusing on now that the fight for the embassy is over.”

Robert Stearns, a pastor and leading voice in the Christian Zionist movement, tells Haaretz that evangelicals “take strength” from the embassy move and are “motivated” to only increase their activism on behalf of the Jewish state.

“You have to go back to what happened last year in order to understand why we are emboldened,” he says. “I think the reason we feel this way is because we were told by

experts for years that moving the embassy to Jerusalem would lead to World War III. We were portrayed in media reports as crazy people who want to set the world on fire, who want to move the embassy because we're advancing war. And then the embassy moved — and what happened? [The exact opposite.](#)”

On the day the embassy relocation ceremony took place on May 14, 2018, there were violent clashes between Palestinians and the Israeli army on the Gaza border, resulting in 59 Palestinian deaths. (That protest was part of a wider “March of Return” border demonstration over several months during which hundreds of Palestinians were shot.) But Stearns is right that, overall, the embassy move did not lead to major violence throughout the Arab and Muslim world. Indeed, even its impact within the Palestinian territories was limited and less damaging than some of the dire warnings that preceded the relocation.

“What we’ve been seeing over the past year is that, quietly but steadily, Israel is continuing to create relationships with Arab and Muslim countries,” Stearns says. “There is potential today for much better relations between Israel and countries in the Islamic world. So when we look at all this a year after the embassy move, we feel this has given us the strength to speak with more confidence and to continue pushing for our political priorities. And supporting Israel is number one among those priorities.”

Stearns believes “there is going to be greater activism in support of Israel over the next few years — more than ever before.” To anyone who thinks the embassy move will lead to complacency and a relaxed approach, Stearns says: “You ain’t seen nothing yet. This is only the beginning.”

A U.S. movement goes global

Two weeks ago, the Israel Allies Foundation — an international organization promoting Christian advocacy for Israel — held an event on Capitol Hill to promote the “relaunching” of its congressional caucus. The Israel Allies Caucus includes Republican and Democratic lawmakers, and is led by two Jewish Democrats (Eliot Engel of New York and Brad Sherman of California) and two Christian Republicans (Doug Lamborn of Colorado and Steve Chabot of Ohio).

At the event, which attracted about 80 people, the speakers, including lawmakers, activists and pastors, offered an endless stream of praise for Trump’s policies regarding Israel. The embassy move was mentioned in almost every speech, as was Trump’s decision, taken two weeks before the Israeli general election, to [recognize the Golan Heights](#) as part of the Jewish state. His policy toward Iran — including his withdrawal last year from the Iran nuclear deal — also received a lot of support around the room.

“These meaningful actions send the strong message to our friends in Israel and around the world that America is restoring our relationship with Israel,” Rep. Lamborn said during the event. He called Trump’s impact on the U.S.-Israel relationship “monumental.”

Most of the speeches focused on the past year — which was arguably the best in the history of the Christian Zionist movement, with one political achievement following another. However, it was less clear what the movement’s leading priorities would be moving forward.

A suggestion in some of the speeches was that other countries should be encouraged to follow the United States’ lead and move their embassies to Jerusalem. To date, [the only country to have done so is Guatemala](#) — not exactly a world power. Although other countries have issued statements saying they were considering or even planning such a move, they have yet to fulfill those intentions.

Stearns is convinced this reality will change, and soon. He sees the Christian Zionism movement expanding to different parts of the world, influencing policy decisions as it has done in the United States.

“Christian Zionism has a very long history as an idea, but the actual organized, political movement is maybe 35 years old,” he explains. “We’re now reaching a level of maturity as a movement, and one important aspect of it is that we’re going global. Evangelicals are becoming a political force in different parts of the world, and wherever that happens we are working to support the State of Israel,” he says.

Stearns recently visited [Brazil, where evangelical voters helped the far-right politician Jair Bolsonaro win last year’s presidential election](#). Bolsonaro [promised to move the Brazilian Embassy to Jerusalem](#), but so far has only taken the smaller step of announcing a new trade office in the city. Stearns says the growing evangelical community in Brazil still expects Bolsonaro to follow through on his election pledge.

A similar message was conveyed to Bolsonaro by a group of Christian leaders in Brazil last month, including evangelical pastors from the United States. According to reports in the Brazilian media, the pastors told Bolsonaro that Brazil will be “blessed” once he fulfills his promise to move the embassy. John Hagee, who heads the influential lobby group Christians United for Israel, was quoted as saying that “Brazil holds the key” to South America’s policy toward Israel.

Expanding, declining movement

Samuel Goldman, a political science professor at George Washington University who recently published a book on the history of Christian Zionism in the United States, says “the future of Christian Zionism is probably not in America but in religious movements that are emerging throughout Latin America, parts of Africa and Asia. That’s where you see the movement expanding and growing these days,” he tells Haaretz.

Goldman’s book, “God’s Country: Christian Zionism in America,” ends by predicting that the movement could actually decline in the United States, where it had flourished for decades.

“I think that Christian Zionism of the conservative, evangelical kind is slowly declining,” Goldman notes. “Young evangelicals in the United States seem to be more diverse in their opinions and views about Israel and, in general, not as interested in the subject. It’s not as much of a priority for many of them as it was for the previous generations.”

His assessment is supported by [a survey of evangelicals’ views on Israel](#), published in December 2017, with older evangelicals offering more unconditional support of Israel than those under 35. Goldman notes that this trend isn’t unique to policies regarding Israel and that younger evangelicals don’t share many of the political views and behaviors associated with the evangelical voting bloc.

“Take, for example, Jerry Falwell Jr.,” Goldman says — referring to the pastor and president of Virginia’s Liberty University who is one of the most influential evangelical leaders in the United States today. “He seems to be speaking mostly to his father’s audience and generation, and is not as popular among younger evangelicals. When he endorsed Trump in 2016, there was pushback even from within the university, where students spoke out against him. That’s one important example of the generational gaps.”

Last week, it was reported that before announcing his endorsement of Trump on the eve of the Iowa caucuses in 2016, Falwell Jr. received help from Trump’s former personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, to prevent “personal” photographs becoming public. Falwell Jr. denied those reports.

‘Trump understands what his voters want’

[Generational differences](#) within the evangelical community are not the only reason for concern among Israel supporters. Another is the fact that evangelical political influence today is almost entirely focused on the Republican Party and is very limited on the Democratic side. If Trump falls short of winning a second term, the “golden era” that evangelical supporters have enjoyed since he entered the White House will end abruptly. Trump will likely emphasize this during the 2020 election campaign, in an attempt to encourage evangelicals to vote for him in large numbers and increase his chances of reelection.

“Trump understands his evangelical base of supporters very well,” says Philos Project President Robert Nicholson, whose organization “promotes positive Christian engagement in the Middle East,” according to its website. Nicholson is an evangelical Christian, but his organization’s work focuses on different Christian denominations and also on interfaith cooperation with Jews and Muslims.

“I think Trump’s success is mostly because he’s in touch with his own voters and he understands what they want,” Nicholson told Haaretz in a phone interview from Jerusalem, where he was leading a delegation of U.S. journalists and researchers this week. “There are stories in the media about Christian Zionist lobbying efforts, but I think these decisions were mostly about Trump trying to please his voters. He was

simply responding to the priorities of the part of America that voted for him,” he explains.

Asked what further policy steps Trump could take during the election year to remind evangelicals of his support for Israel, Nicholson says: “I’m not sure, honestly, because what’s left to ask? He moved the embassy to Jerusalem, pulled out of the Iran deal and recognized the Golan Heights as part of Israel — those are three very big decisions.”

He added, however, that many evangelicals are waiting to see the contents of the Trump administration’s Middle East peace plan, which could be released this summer.

Stearns says he believes Trump’s already record levels of support among evangelical voters will further grow in 2020, and that the embassy move will be “the number one reason” for that. “I think Trump’s [evangelical] base is not only holding but it’s actually growing,” he says. “People see what he has done for Israel. It’s not something they are going to forget.”