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Coalition of Evangelicals Voices Support for Palestinian State

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN

In recent years, conservative evangelicals who claim a Biblical mandate to protect Israel have built a bulwark of support for the Jewish nation — sending donations, denouncing its critics and urging it not to evacuate settlements or forfeit territory.

Now more than 30 evangelical leaders are stepping forward to say these efforts have given the wrong impression about the stance of many, if not most, American evangelicals.

On Friday, these leaders sent a letter to President Bush saying that both Israelis and Palestinians have “legitimate rights stretching back for millennia to the lands of Israel/Palestine,” and that they support the creation of a Palestinian state “that includes the vast majority of the West Bank.”

They say that being a friend to Jews and to Israel “does not mean withholding criticism when it is warranted.” The letter adds, “Both Israelis and Palestinians have committed violence and injustice against each other.”

The letter is signed by 34 evangelical leaders, many of whom lead denominations, Christian charities, ministry organizations, seminaries and universities.

They include Gary M. Benedict, president of The Christian and Missionary Alliance, a denomination of 2,000 churches; Richard J. Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary; Gordon MacDonald, chairman of World Relief; Richard E. Stearns, president of World Vision; David Neff, editor of Christianity Today; and Berten A. Waggoner, national director and president of The Vineyard USA, an association of 630 churches in the United States.

“This group is in no way anti-Israel, and we make it very clear we’re committed to the security of Israel,” said Ronald J. Sider, president of Evangelicals for Social Action, which often takes liberal positions on issues. “But we want a solution that is viable. Obviously there would have to be compromises.”

They are clearly aiming their message not just at President Bush, but at the Muslim world and policy makers in the State Department.

Mr. Sider said he and three other evangelical leaders got the idea for the letter in February at the U.S.-Islamic World Forum in Doha, Qatar, where they met Muslim and American diplomats who were shocked to discover the existence of American evangelicals who favored a Palestinian state. Mr. Sider says they will translate the letter into Arabic and distribute it in the Middle East and Europe.

“We think it’s crucial that the Muslim world realize that there are evangelical Christians in the U.S. in large numbers that want a fair solution,” Mr. Sider said.

In the last year and half, liberal and moderate evangelicals have initiated two other efforts that demonstrated fissures in the evangelical movement. Last year, they parted with the conservative flank by campaigning against climate change and global warming. This year, they denounced the use of torture in the fight against terrorism. Some of the participants in those campaigns also signed this letter.

The Rev. Joel C. Hunter, senior pastor of Northland Church in Longwood, Fla., said, "There is a part of the evangelical family which is what I call Christian Zionists, who are just so staunchly pro-Israel that Israel and their side can do no wrong, and it's almost anti-Biblical to criticize Israel for anything. But there are many more evangelicals who are really open and seek justice for both parties."

The loudest and best-organized voices in the evangelical movement have been sending a very different message: that the Palestinians have no legitimate claim to the land.

The Rev. John Hagee, who founded Christians United for Israel, was informed of the letter and read most of it. He responded: "Bible-believing evangelicals will scoff at that message.

"Christians United for Israel is opposed to America pressuring Israel to give up more land to anyone for any reason. What has the policy of appeasement ever produced for Israel that was beneficial?" Mr. Hagee said.

"God gave to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob a covenant in the Book of Genesis for the land of Israel that is eternal and unbreakable, and that covenant is still intact," he said. "The Palestinian people have never owned the land of Israel, never existed as an autonomous society. There is no Palestinian language. There is no Palestinian currency. And to say that Palestinians have a right to that land historically is an historical fraud."

Christians United for Israel held a conference with 4,500 attendees in Washington this month, and Mr. Hagee sends e-mail action alerts on Israel every Monday to 55,000 pastors and leaders.

There is a crucial theological difference between Mr. Hagee's views on Israel and those expressed by the letter writers, said Timothy P. Weber, a church historian, former seminary president and the author of "On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend."

Mr. Hagee and others are dispensationalists, Mr. Weber said, who interpret the Bible as predicting that in order for Christ to return, the Jews must gather in Israel, the third temple must be built in Jerusalem and the Battle of Armageddon must be fought.

Mr. Weber said, "The dispensationalists have parlayed what is a distinctly minority position theologically within evangelicalism into a major political voice."

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