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Headlines

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Conservative Christians Biggest Backers of Iraq War

by Jim Lobe

WASHINGTON - Of the major religious groups in the United States, evangelical Christians are the biggest backers of Israel and Washington's planned war against Iraq, says a new survey released here Wednesday by a politically potent group of fundamentalist Christians and Jews.

Some 69 percent of conservative Christians favor military action against Baghdad; 10 percentage points more than the U.S. adult population as a whole.

And almost two-thirds of evangelical Christians say they support Israeli actions towards "Palestinian terrorism", compared with 54 percent of the general population, according to the survey, which was released by Stand For Israel, a six-month-old spin-off of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (IFCJ).

"The single strongest group for Israel in the United States, apart from Jews, is conservative Christians," declared Ralph Reed, co-chairman of Stand for Israel and former executive director of the Christian Coalition. He also noted that 80 percent of self-identified Republicans also favor military action against Baghdad.

Reed, who was widely regarded as the wunderkind of the Christian Right during the 1990s, said the poll results might have important political implications in upcoming U.S. elections, particularly for the Jewish vote, which has traditionally gone overwhelmingly to Democrats. In 2000, for example, only 18 percent of Jewish voters cast ballots for President George W. Bush.

"There is a new openness among Jewish voters to support this president and other Republicans who strongly support Israel," Reed said, adding that he believes Bush in 2004 may reap close to the 38 percent of the Jewish vote harvested by Ronald Reagan in 1984, the highest percentage ever received by a Republican presidential candidate.

Some 81 percent of Jewish respondents said they see Bush as a strong supporter of Israel, and 46 percent said they were more likely to vote for him based on his handling of the "war on terrorism". The poll also found that two-thirds of Republicans said they supported Israel in the current conflict, compared to 46 percent of Democrats.

"The bottom line is that Bush appears to be making some significant inroads with this heavily Democratic group, something that could have an impact on the next two election cycles," said Ed Goetas, head of the Tarrance Group, which carried out the poll.

The survey, which included 1,200 respondents contacted last week, tends to confirm the findings of similar polls over the last several years that have shown strong support for Israel on the part of evangelical Christians, who together make up about one third of the U.S. adult population.

Historically apolitical, the group first came to the attention of the political elite in 1976 when large numbers of them helped elect Jimmy Carter, a "born-again" Christian. Disillusioned by Carter's liberal politics and social attitudes, they became a major recruiting ground for the "New Right" that in turn paved the way for the election in 1980 of former president Ronald Reagan.

At the same time, Christian fundamentalists were also avidly courted by the right-wing Likud government in Israel, which saw in them a promising new constituency that, for theological reasons, could be persuaded to oppose the return of Jerusalem and the West Bank to Arab rule.

In 1979, the government of Israel reportedly gave Jerry Falwell, head of the "Moral Majority" and

the leading Christian Right figure of the time, his first private jet.

The Israeli government has also arranged special tours for evangelical Christian groups that have contributed tens of millions of dollars to Jewish and Israeli agencies involved in resettling Jews to Israel and in building Israeli settlements on the occupied territories.

With offices in Chicago and Jerusalem, the IFCJ has acted as a key forum for promoting the relationship between conservative U.S. Jews and evangelical Christians since 1983. As violence between Israelis and Palestinians intensified last spring, the group created "Stand for Israel", which it called "an effort to strategically mobilize leadership and grassroots support in the Christian community for the State of Israel".

"Jews are only now beginning to understand the depth of support they have among conservative Christians," said IFCJ's founder-director and Stand for Israel co-chairman, Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, at the time.

"Once the potential of this immense reservoir of good will is fully comprehended by the Jewish people and strategically tapped by the Stand for Israel campaign, you will see support for Israel in the United States swell dramatically."

The new survey's results appear to bear out that prediction, at least in part. Two thirds of conservative Christians queried in the poll said that they believed they shared the same or similar perspective as Jews when it comes to the issue of "Israel and its current struggle against Palestine".

Reed and Eckstein also claimed that the survey effectively debunked the notion that evangelical Christian support for Israel was based on New Testament prophecy that the reconstruction of the ancient Jewish kingdom of David would usher in the "end times" and the second coming of Christ.

Asked which was the most important of four possible reasons why they supported Israel, 56 percent of fundamentalist Christian respondents chose political reasons, particularly Israel's democratic values, its alliance with the United States in the war against terrorism, and its role as a safe haven for persecuted Jews elsewhere. Thirty-five percent opted for the "end-times" option.

But when given a choice of four religious alternatives, only 28 percent cited the end-times alternative. Almost two thirds said that God had given the Jews the land of Israel as the main theological reason for backing the Jewish state.

"This survey bears out my view that Christians are trustworthy and vital allies," said Eckstein. "I've seen more positive changes (in Jewish and conservative Christian relations) in the past six months than I have for the past 25 years," he added.

Along with announcing the survey results, Eckstein, who co-chairs Stand for Israel with Reed, unveiled a one-minute video which will be run in "tens of thousands" of churches with combined memberships of 3.2 million people on Sunday, Oct. 20, exhorting Christians to pray for Israel whose enemies, it says, "are on the attack again".

"God has promised that those who bless Israel will themselves be blessed," says the video, which is filled with recent images of violence in Israel and the West Bank.

Reed conceded that not all conservative Christians were as supportive of Israel as those involved in the "Stand for Israel" campaign.

Indeed, some 50 evangelical ministers recently issued a statement opposing unilateral military action against Iraq, and at least one national evangelical group has urged a more-balanced policy toward Israel and the Palestinians. But Reed insisted that his views represented those of a "very, very large majority" of evangelical Christians.

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