

Politics for God and Jesus: Rising Evangelical Influence in U.S. Foreign Policy During Trump's Presidency

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Abstract

This paper aims to show how well known evangelical interest in U.S. foreign policy has affected foreign policy decisions during Trump's presidency. Evangelicals were highly represented both within Trump's cabinet and among his close advisors. Most evangelicals in the US are the staunchest supporters of Israel due to a belief based on the End Times prophecy, dispensationalism. Dispensationalists believe that Israel has a unique significance in Biblical prophecies and to God. In parallel with their influence over the White House, Israel and the U.S.'s cooperation became broader and deeper. Trump has recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017 and moved the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem in 2018. Trump's decision was a long demanded move for evangelicals who believe that Israel should have full control over Jerusalem for the "Second Coming of Christ". Most recently, Israel and the UAE reached a peace accord led by Trump. Evangelicals' activism was effective in bringing this accord to the table too. The common hostility towards Iran has been the main factor underlying this accord. Besides, Trump's policies towards Iran were a way of initiating the return of Christ for dispensationalists predicting that Iran has a great role in Biblical history. Our thesis is that evangelical influence over the Trump administration has stood out as one of the salient elements of the US policy of maximum pressure against Iran and efforts to improve relations between the Gulf states and Israel.

Keywords: U.S. Foreign Policy, Trump's Presidency, Evangelicals, Dispensationalism, Second Coming of Christ, Israel, Jerusalem, Hostility against Iran.

1. Introduction

Evangelicalism has remained deeply rooted in American public life for centuries. But its political influence and visibility have begun to increase especially after the 1970s. It has been disseminated in these years by America's ubiquitous religious broadcasters and preachers with the contribution of the proliferation of mass media. The sermons of prominent evangelical leaders have reached millions of people through radio and television. The realization of this great political potential has encouraged evangelicals to be more active in politics. Foreign policy has been an important part of the political agendas of Evangelical groups. Most evangelical Christians in the US are the staunchest supporters of the Israeli government due to a belief based on the End Times prophecy, dispensationalism. This belief had loomed large on the landscape of U.S. evangelicalism in the twentieth century's recent decades and become a bedrock doctrine among Evangelical Christians. According to dispensationalists, Israel has a unique significance in biblical prophecies and to God. Accordingly, the return of the Jews to the holy land before the return of Jesus Christ, the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, and the empowerment of Israel by existing safely within these borders are among the central goals of evangelicals in foreign policy.

Dispensationalism argues that God divides world history into dispensations. The period after the birth of Christianity is considered an extra period in which all Christians were expected to become evangelical as the end of the world is approaching. According to dispensationalism, the world would fall upon a time of great tribulation for 7 years followed by Christ's return to rule the world. Only true believers would get salvaged and snatched into heaven by Jesus (rapture)

before this period of great distress. When Christ returned, he would fight the Antichrist's forces (Battle of Armageddon) who have occupied Jerusalem. He would destroy the evil establishment and supersede it with his own kingdom. Subsequently, a thousand-year Golden age would start for 1000 years. At the conclusion of Jesus's reign, he would conduct the final judgment of mankind and herald the eternal state (Marsden, 2006, p. 5-66). Based on this storyline, dispensationalists believe that the Jews, as a chosen people of God, have a special mission in God's plan for the world (Leonard, 2010, p. 59). Dispensationalists regard the unquestioning support to Israel as a matter of faith, especially in view of its role in the End Times. In the nuclear age, the scenarios related to the imminent Battle of Armageddon have attracted great attention. Paul Boyer draws attention to the close linkages between nuclear war and biblical prophecies in the United States of the Cold War years. During this period, the lines between religious beliefs and political greed also blurred as the political and theological conceptions blended with each other (Boyer, 1994, p. 121- 157). Apocalyptic theology is intertwined with Messianic politics. As The world was ending, it had to be saved.

Consequently, Evangelicalism's influence in the U.S. has developed between private and public realms with various narratives and interpretations from the colonial period to the present, and it has ebbed and flowed in the political realm. When religiosity was on the rise in American history, evangelicalism has affected both governance philosophies of presidents and their foreign policies as well as their religious beliefs at different levels as in the 18th and 19th century's revivalist movements. However, religion and evangelical groups as a compelling political actor has settled in the political realm in 1976, when Jimmy Carter, who was also affiliated to an Evangelical Church, was elected as the President of the USA (Steding, 2014, p. 23). As from Carter's presidency, evangelical groups have become one of the forceful elements of decision-making procedures.

By the late 1960s, evangelicalism has attached the priority to moral ground, emphasized individualism and personal belief as was in the abolition of slavery and civil rights movement, and has urged people to stay away from the filth of politics. In this context, a movement aimed at eliminating racial discrimination has been formed in the Southern states as of the mid-1950s. The efforts to codify the 1964 Human Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act has been actively supported by Evangelical clergymen and their followers (Steding, p. 20). In 1969 TIME questioned, "God is coming back to life?" And 7 years later, Newsweek declared 1976 the "Year of the Evangelical" (Steding, p. 21). On the other hand, new evangelical groups such as "Moral Majority", "Christian Voice" and "Religious Roundtable" have begun to appear. These organizations have equiponderated organizations that focused on civil rights and anti-war activities, Since the 1960s, the number of these groups has gradually increased and these special-purpose organizations have transformed into quasi-churches in their own hook, mobilizing the time and funds of their devoted members (Wuthnow, 1990, p. 100).

In the said period, the classes demanding social reform in the US has been incapable of building an allied front based around a core range of matter similar to the religious right, and they were shattered due to identity-based political fractions. These fractions developed around insurmountable cleavages based on gender, race, and theological viewpoint, and caused the movement to fall apart to smaller batches that address individual demographic problems. Thus, as an "evangelical left" could not develop, there was no opposition group in the Evangelical congregation to come to grips with the "Evangelical Right" (Shwartz, 2011, p. 83).

The emergence of the above-mentioned new evangelical organizations coincides with the time when Jimmy Carter as an Evangelical, became the American President. Thus, evangelicals expected Jimmy Carter to look after their temperament, who they believed shared similar beliefs with them. However, Carter has not supported the conservative policies they demanded and has left them disappointed (Hankins, 2008, p. 143). The backlash and resentment caused by Carter's policies have led Evangelists to support Ronald Reagan against him in the 1980 election. With Reagan's victory, the evangelicals have been widely articulated with the Republican Party, which they thought was compatible with their social-political agenda and responded to their main concerns, and this relationship has continued to this day. However, they remained visible not only in the Republican Party but to a lesser extent in the Democratic Party administrations. As from Richard Nixon, all presidents have met with evangelical leaders such as Billy Graham and James Dobson for advice and have somehow been linked to evangelicalism (Duerr, Thorne-Hamilton, 2010, p. 7).

Finally, The vast majority of evangelicals has voted for Trump in the 2016 Presidential elections with 81% (Martinez - Smith, November 9, 2016). They have continued to support him after the election and have become his most loyal constituency. Evangelicals have highly been represented both within Trump's cabinet and among his close advisors. In parallel with their influence over the White House, Israel and the U.S.'s cooperation became broader and deeper during Trump's presidency. Trump has recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017 and moved the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem in 2018. This decision has been one of the most prominent examples of evangelical influence over the Trump administration. Following this, "The Vision for Peace" plan issued by Donald Trump in 2019 has been another important foreign policy move pioneered by the Trump administration within the framework of dispensationalist conviction that Israel should gain full control over Jerusalem.

Most recently, Israel and the United Arab Emirates have reached a peace accord led by Trump. The common enmity towards Iran and its allies has been the key fact underlying this accord. Besides, Trump's policies towards Iran has been considered as a way of initiating the return of Christ for dispensationalists predicting that Iran has a great role to play in Biblical history. Iran is one of the countries that would launch the Armageddon War by attacking Israel. Likewise, many Iranian-centered stories in the Bible have been ascribed to daily political developments. Secretary of State Pompeo and various Evangelical leaders have referred to these stories. Thereby, Iran has been "demonized" and the Trump administration's oppressive policies towards this country have been justified. Evangelical and dispensationalist influence over the Trump administration has stood out as one of the salient elements of the US policy of maximum pressure against Iran and efforts to improve relations between the Gulf states and Israel.

The activism of evangelical groups and Trump's ministers and advisors who adopt dispensationalist beliefs have dramatically impacted the formation of the foreign policy during the Trump administration. Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, two of the most critical figures in the Trump administration's foreign policy decision-making procedures, have embraced this theology. In particular, Pompeo draws attention as a figure familiar with the biblical and the End Times prophecies based on a dispensationalist theology (Wong, March 30, 2019). On the other hand, evangelical groups have contributed to the shaping of significant foreign policy decisions by penetrating into the Trump administration with the active diplomacy toward a set of Middle Eastern countries. The decision of the Israeli Embassy

to move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and then the Vision for Peace plan has ushered in a new era in the US 'Middle East policies and its strong support for Israel. In the sequel, Trump's led agreement that projected the development of official relations between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel, and the efforts to strengthen relations between the Gulf states and Israel for the joint struggle against Iran, demonstrate the dimensions of so-called evangelical influence in US foreign policy.

2. Dispensationalism And The End Times Prophecies: God's Covenant with Israel

Evangelicals basically justify their support for Israel on two causes. The first one is God's promise to Abraham in the Book of Genesis, 12: 3 that "She will bless those who bless the Jewish people, and whoever curses them, she will curse. In this context, the Jewish people have a special place in the presence of God, and support for the Jewish country is one of the most basic obligations for every true believer (Bird, 2013, p. 557). Secondly, they emphasize the prophecies of the Book of Revelation regarding the End Times, the Second Coming of Christ, and the anticipated Golden Age during Christ's reign for a thousand years. Revelation's mention of the extent of the kingdom of Christ has coined the term "Millennium" to delineate the ensuing Golden Age. Hence "Millenarians" are people who believe in a future implementation of prophecies in regard to the thousand-year reign of Christ. Based on this interpretation of the Bible, they believe that God divides human history into various ages (dispensations) in which different religions or beliefs prevailed in each one (Leonard 2010, p. 59). These dispensations reflect God's plan for humanity and indicate a general timeline of prophecy in line with "dispensational premillennialism".

Throughout most of their history, Christians have believed that God's promises to Abraham in the Tenakh must be interpreted allegorically. The phrase "The descendants of Abraham" has implied to not only Jews, but all believers, and "the promised land" has been interpreted as the "assurance of heaven" that God would grant only to the believers. Christians have not believed that Israel or the Jews maintained to carry God's exceptional grace, they have not considered geopolitical developments in the Middle East as God's redemption of Israel or the traces of the end of the world (Gorski, 2017, p. 20-23).

Dispensationalism, which became popular among Puritans in Britain in the 16th and 17th centuries and became a theological school by spreading in the USA since the beginning of the 19th century, made a different interpretation to these prophecies. This new theology has largely shaped the views of the evangelical movement today. The Dispensationalists reconcile these prophecies with the anticipated return of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament and argue that the end of the world will come in a plot predicted by these prophecies (Noll, 1993, p. 617-627). The rise of the Zionist movement as from the 20th century, the increase in the number of Jewish settlements in the "promised land" with the establishment of the British mandate in Palestine, the 1917 Balfour Declaration, and the rebuilding of Israel in 1948, has empowered hope that the coming of the Messiah is imminent. Hence, these events demonstrated to Evangelicals that they interpret the Bible correctly and that the prophecies in the Bible have begun to rise according to the dispensationalist end times program (Lahr, 2007, p. 4).

In the 20th century, the two authors have contributed significantly in reaching the large masses and becoming a mainline phenomenon with millions of supporters. The first author is

theologian Cyrus Scofield. His book, "Scofield Reference Bible" published in 1909, has promulgated a dispensationalist interpretation of the Bible in a style that was understandable to all. It has built a foundation providing millions of people to read what Scofield wrote in the new fundamentalist churches across the country (Sizer, 2006, p. 11). The work taught preachers and other church-goers to read their Bible through a dispensationalist scheme.

The latter is Hal Lindsey. Lindsey's work, "The Late Great Planet Earth", one of the best-selling books in the 1970s, has sought to narrate the then-global developments through the Dispensationalist vision. By using the rebuilding of Israel in 1948 as the starting on the road to Armageddon, Lindsey has provided the audience a broad overview of the Cold War, the Third Arab-Israeli War, the counter culture of the 1960s, the Vietnam War, and other developments within a sole and apparent perspective (Lindsey, 1970).

After Lindsey, dispensationalism has continued to be a popular topic in American public opinion. "Left Behind", published with a series of 16 novels between 1995 and 2007, designed according to a dispensationalist scenario and depicted the end of the world has sold 63 million copies worldwide. In the novels, Russia, manipulated by the UN Secretary-General, who is also the Antichrist, would attempt an invasion of Israel, but Israel would be supernaturally protected from this invasion, and finally, with the return of Jesus it would host the Armageddon war (La Haye, Jenkins, 1995).

In these books and so forth, it has been narrated that today's world is under Satan's control and we are approaching a time when Russian, European, Iranian, Arab, African, and Chinese armies would invade Israel, Israeli armies would be destroyed by a limited nuclear war and millions of Israelis would die, but a small group of people who would accept Jesus as the Messiah would be saved (Boyer, 1994, p. 5-8). Evangelists argue that these prophecies are elaboratively explained in the Bible and are about to begin, arguing that the re-rise of Russia and China, the rebirth of Israel in 1948, the reunification of Jerusalem in 1967, and the growing Iranian threat to Israel are the key to these prophecies. Thus, Evangelicals' support for Israel emanates from an idiosyncratic reading of the Bible and a dispensationalist belief in which Israel act a central role. In the framework of all these developments, dispensationalism introduced into American evangelism the idea that Israel has a unique importance in the biblical prophecies and in the eyes of God. The majority of evangelical Christians in the US have become the staunchest supporters of the Israeli government for a reason based on the prophecy of the End Times. According to the evangelical belief system, the rebuilt of Israel and its full control of Jerusalem, including the area where the Al Aqsa mosque is located, would pave the way for the prophecies of the End Times (Hankins, 2008, p. 91).

According to a survey of Pew Forum, 44% of U.S nation, including 82% of Evangelicals, believe that Israel has been bestowed to the Jews by God (Lipka, October 3, 2013). In such a manner of belief, foreign policy becomes the instrument of a divine plan. Developments in the world and especially in the Middle East are important to the extent that they show the signs of the second coming of Jesus. Accordingly, for evangelicals, the Bible is not only a guide to walking on the path of God and piety. It also reveals God's plan for history and humanity and shows how God served in the former times and what his plan would be in the future. Within this framework, it can be found strong dispensationalist themes that have been manifested in American foreign policy since the past. Recently, those who have subscribed to this worldview based on the doomsday and end times beliefs have been represented in Trump's religious

supporters, his advisors, and the most critical positions in his administration. Even if Donald Trump does not have a grasp of this theological framework and even does not believe it, this agent stands out as an element that should not be ignored in the policies of a President who received 81% of the evangelical votes and picked his vice president and secretary of state out of Evangelicals.

3. United States Recognition of Jerusalem As The Capital of Israel And The Relocation of The U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem

3.1. U.S.'s Policy On The Status of Jerusalem From The Past to The Present

The status of Jerusalem has been at the top of the international agenda after the Balfour Declaration which the British government showed Palestine as a homeland to the Jews and opened the region to Jewish settlement. In 1947, the United Nations have recommended that the city be declared as an international city with a different law and status, instead of incorporating into Arab or Jewish states and then built on the territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. However, as a result of the war erupted after the unilateral declaration of the state of Israel in 1948, while Israel grabbed the western part of the city, Jordan captured the east (PASIA, 2007, p. 173). Between 1948 and 1967, the United States has not made significant attempts to come up with the status of Jerusalem. US's Middle East policy has been more affected by the escalation of the Cold War and the conflict with the communist bloc. For this reason, Then American foreign policy has been established on the basis of not to provoke Arab states. For example, in 1952, the US has condemned Israel's decision to move its Foreign Ministry to Jerusalem (PASIA, p. 173).

In the third Arab-Israeli war in 1967, Israel has occupied East Jerusalem as well and annexed the region, declaring that the city would remain whole and undivided as its eternal capital. It then has built many settlements that the vast majority of the international community considered illegal. The US and several other countries have disclaimed to recognize the annexation and continue to keep their embassies in or near Tel Aviv (Paker, November 19, 2016). After the war, the US administration increased its political support for Israel who has invaded the West Bank and Gaza, as well as Egypt's Sinai peninsula and the Golan Heights of Syria. The US has claimed that Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories be dependent on a comprehensive political agreement that would guarantee Israel's existence and security. For months, the United States has prevented the UN from adopting a resolution urging Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories (Spiegel, 1985, p. 154-155). The main concern of the U.S. has been Israel's security rather than the Jerusalem problem. Therefore, when Israel decided to annex the eastern part of the city, it has not consulted the United States. From this point on, the US administration has given up the attempt to reach an immediate and comprehensive solution between the Arab states and Israel. As a result, the US had to accept UN resolution 242, which called for Israel to the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the occupied territories. Washington has also issued a statement regarding Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem, stating that "they do not acknowledge that these attempts have changed the status of Jerusalem" (PASIA, p. 272).

Calls to move the US embassy to Jerusalem have first began in February 1972. Gerald Ford, who is the leader of the Republican minority at the Congress at the time, has announced that he

supported the recognition of Jerusalem as “the historical and legal capital of Israel” by moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem (Spiegel, p. 232). However, President Richard Nixon has refused this idea. After Nixon's resignation, on August 9, 1974 Ford has become president. At his first press conference twenty days after the inauguration, Ford has responded to a question about his earlier embassy proposal to move, ““Under the current circumstances and the importance of getting a just and lasting peace in the Middle East, that particular proposal ought to stand aside” (Jewish Telegraphic Agency, August 29, 1974). Ford’s approach would become an US tradition where Presidential candidates promised to move the embassy before each election and postponed it for the sake of “peace” after being elected as President.

Before the 1976 US Presidential elections, although the Democratic Party platform has included a statement “America's Israeli Embassy should move to Jerusalem”, Democratic Party candidate Jimmy Carter has declared that “he could not promise such a change” before he was elected President. Carter has stated that he would support any decision on Jerusalem only “if it is part of an overall Middle East settlement” and has said that “if a delay would help negotiations for a settlement, he would not move the embassy.” (Jewish Telegraphic Agency, September 2, 1976). As of Carter’s presidency, the USA has increased its support to Israel within the UN by vetoing the decisions taken against Israel's activities in Jerusalem during the presidency of Carter. However, Carter has explained that “their position at this point doesn’t represent any change in their policies regarding the settlements in occupied territories and the status of Jerusalem”. On the other hand, Carter, as Israel desired, has encouraged a policy that Jerusalem is not of an international framework, but the subject of negotiations that should be realized bilaterally. In a speech he made at the UN on 3 March 1980, he has stated that they believe that “Jerusalem should not be divided and its status must be determined through mutual negotiations for a comprehensive peace agreement” and that they will not accept any position that could endanger Israel's vital security interests.” (PASIA, p. 300).

In 1982, Ronald Reagan has announced an initiative known as the Reagan Plan to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, calling for a peace process that would involve Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinians. Regarding Jerusalem, Reagan said: “Jerusalem must remain undivided, but its ultimate status must be determined through negotiations” (Council of Foreign Relations, September 1, 1982). In the context of a probable peace process, a draft has been proposed in 1984 to relocate the embassy. The Reagan administration has opposed it and prevented its passage, on the grounds that “It would give the message that the U.S. accepted the position of only one party on the matter”; The Jerusalem problem should be “resolved through negotiations”; and that the relocation of the embassy would “seriously undermine the US ability to play an effective role in the Middle East peace process” (PASIA, p. 279-280). Despite this, Congress has passed several resolutions stating that it supports the embassy move to Jerusalem (PASIA, p. 7). The 1993-1994 Oslo agreements have created a new context for discussion of the problem of embassy relocation.

After the Oslo agreements were signed between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Congress has brought the issue of the US embassy back to the agenda. In May 1995, a group of senators have proposed an act to move the embassy to Jerusalem. Although the Bill Clinton administration has promised to move the embassy to Jerusalem during its presidential campaign, this kind of act would jeopardize the peace process and the mediator role of the United States (PASIA, p. 298-299). Despite this stance of the Clinton administration, the bill has been passed in the Senate and the House of Representatives in October 1995. The act has

contained a provision allowing the President to waive the application of the law on national security grounds. Until 2018, US administrations could not take the decision to relocate the embassy based on this provision (PASIA, p. 296-297). Clinton, Bush, and Obama have signed these waivers every six months, fearing that if the embassy was moved, there would be a violent reaction in the Arab world.

3.2. The Evangelical Effect

Donald Trump, who was elected President of the United States in 2016, has adopted a much more pro-Israeli tone regarding Jerusalem than the relatively cautious position adopted by both Republicans and Democrats, linking the embassy to Jerusalem with a two-state solution and negotiations. Trump has met with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu during his presidential campaign in September 2016 and said that “Jerusalem has been the eternal capital of the Jewish people for more than 3,000 years”. He has announced that in his administration, the United States will approve Congress's decision calling for the U.S. to recognize that Jerusalem is the undivided capital of the State of Israel. During his election campaign, Trump has said that he would move the embassy to Jerusalem “fairly quickly” after taking Office (Paker, November 19, 2016).

Hence, Trump's promise to move the Israeli Embassy to Jerusalem has been on the agenda of Presidential candidates' election campaigns for years, but none of them took this step after they were elected. But Trump has become the first world leader in 2018 to move his country's embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, despite the reaction of the international community, which did not recognize Israel's domination of East Jerusalem, and the UN's decisions to label such an act illegal. In a speech to a rally in Wisconsin in 2020, Trump has said that he made this decision for Evangelicals (Jones, August 18, 2020).

Trump's decision has been a highly desirable move for evangelicals who believe that Israel should have full control of Jerusalem as a first step for the “Second Coming of Christ”. Because it was part of “God's Plan” and one of the prophecies of the Bible. Robert Jeffress, one of Trump's Evangelical advisors, has said that “Jerusalem has been object of the affection of both Jews and Christians down through history and the touchstone of prophecy.” Other evangelicals also acclaimed the decision by describing it as “Biblical” and “fulfilled prophecy” (Burke, December 6, 2017). While referring to the decision, Secretary of State Pompeo also referred to religious citations and his Evangelical faith. At an evangelical conference he attended in Iowa, while the Trump administration is the most pro-Israel administration in US history, the first justification which he applied has been the decision to move the embassy to Jerusalem (Rosenberg, July 20, 2020).

On the other hand, John Hagee, one of the prominent figures of the evangelical movement, has been another influential figure in Trump's decision. Hagee has had a 2-hour meeting with him in 2017 to advise the President before this decision has been taken. Then Hagee has attended the opening ceremony of the Embassy in 2018 with the figures such as Jared Kushner and her wife Jared Kushner. He has gone up to the rostrum during the ceremony and gave an enthusiastic speech in which religious themes were intense. He challenged by saying that “Israel is still alive, that all 'Islamists' should see this” (Bova, August 9, 2018). Therefore, this decision has been one of the most important examples of evangelical influence over the Trump

administration. Some prominent evangelicals have considered Trump as the 6th-century Persian emperor King Cyrus who saved the Jews from Babylon's captivity in BC (Stewart, December 31, 2018). The decision to move the embassy to Jerusalem has strengthened Trump's new position of Cyrus, which rescued the Jews and allowed them to return to their homeland of Jerusalem, and rebuilt the Temple of Solomon.

Then, the Vision for Peace plan, has been proposed by the White House in January 2019, has been another important foreign policy move pioneered by the Trump administration within the framework of a dispensationalist belief that Israel should have full control over Jerusalem. According to the plan, Israel would have sovereignty over almost whole Jerusalem, including Old Jerusalem and the Harem-i Sharif, and Palestinians only would have the right to live in some small areas of East Jerusalem on the other side of the "separation Wall" formed by Israel. This framework carries the manifestations of the evangelical belief that Jerusalem is the epicenter of the End Times and doomsday scenarios (Kershner, January 31, 2020).

On the other hand, the pre-millennial dispensationalists strive to rationalize their policies by drawing on secularism's universalist rhetoric which has deeply shaped American institutions and thereby the world in the last two centuries. The accusations regarding that the evangelical interpretation of the Bible is its misuse by decontextualizing Scriptures have pushed the evangelicals into a defensive position. Accordingly, Johnie Moore, one of Trump's top Evangelical advisors, argues that the influence of dispensationalist views among evangelicals is exaggerated. Moore states that Jerusalem has been discussed in the meetings with Trump in the White House before the decision to move the embassy to Jerusalem, but these discussions were "political not theological". Therefore, the decision of the American embassy to move to Jerusalem is a "geopolitical, not religious" move. Moore claims that evangelicals are "normal people" and have "modern views" and argue that they have no connection with apocalyptic ideas. In line with this, they have argued that the American Congress has passed a law recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 1995, but since then all Presidents have waived it. Therefore, this decision is "an act of historic justice and recognition of the current reality". Jerusalem is currently the headquarters of the Israeli state and no nation other than Israel is not imposed on where its capital will be" (Amos, January 5, 2018). All these discourses reflect the attempts of evangelicals to rationalize their policies by establishing a link between religious world views and contemporary politics. They mask their religious beliefs by borrowing the realist or liberal-secular imagery.

4. Israel's Growing Ties with the Gulf Countries: The Role of Evangelicals and Dispensationalist Theology

4.1. Israel-United Arab Emirates Peace Agreement: Evangelical Diplomacy and Iran Affect

The secret marriage between Israel and the Gulf countries for years has been announced to the world opinion by US President Donald Trump on August 13, 2020, with an agreement proposing the start of official relations between the UAE and Israel. The UAE has been the

third Arab after Egypt and Jordan recognizing Israel. The agreement comprises Israel's consent to suspend annexation plans in the occupied West Bank and declares that it will improve peace efforts in the region. Both countries are supposed to launch to exchange embassies and cooperate with each other in a series of areas such as tourism, education, trade, and security (Landau, September 16, 2020).

Compared to other Gulf countries, Israel's relations with the UAE have been more comprehensive and open to the public since the past. High-level contacts had already become routine. For example, following the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Action Plan between Iran and the P5 + 1 countries, Netanyahu has met with UAE's leaders in Cyprus in 2015 to exchange views on how to fight Iran (Entous, June 18, 2018). Likewise, in December 2019, the United States has hosted a secret trilateral meeting, where a non-aggression pact was also discussed between countries, mainly aimed at coordinating between Israel and the UAE against Iran (Middle East Eye, February 4, 2020). After the US-led "anti-Iran" meeting, a trilateral forum has been organized in the same year between the US, Israel, and the UAE to intensify cooperation against Iran (Wintour, Holmes, February 14, 2019). Although relations with Israel did not appear in the national public opinion, it had lost the characteristics of an official taboo in the UAE. Because both countries had a common agenda. Emotional attitudes towards Israel could not be allowed to overshadow shared common interests against the threat from Iran. Therefore, while the relations have already been developing, this agreement has paved the way for similar agreements and long-term cooperation with other Gulf countries.

The agreement provides to Israel more privileges and explicitly rewards them. Netanyahu has said in a TV speech that The annexation schedule of the West Bank has just "postponed", but it is still on the table (Aljazeera, August 3, 2020). This address shows that Palestine and even the UAE does not have any significant gains from this agreement. Secondly, this agreement purports to aim at Iran rather than being about the Palestinian issue or the annexation of the West Bank. Israel and UAE would like to restrict Iranian influence in the region and share the same strategic goal. The Palestinian cause is no longer at the foreground of the Arab interests, and the countries in the region seem to have changed their priorities in consideration of the new challenges, active menaces, and issues they face. The main threat perception to their national security comes from Iran, Hezbollah and other militia groups. Generally considering the Middle East policy of the Trump administration, which pioneered and mediated this process, the common hostility towards Iran and its allies has been the main factor underlying this agreement.

On the other hand, evangelicals have been very effective in bringing this peace agreement between the UAE and Israel to the table. Before the agreement, in May 2020, while Netanyahu announced that the annexation plan would begin in the West Bank by July at the latest, Israel's normalization process with Arab states has been even more important for the Evangelists than "changing the situation of the barren hills" (Jaffe-Hoffman, August 13, 2020). Evangelical leader Rosenberg, in his meeting with a senior US official, has argued that a peace agreement between Israel and the UAE is "much more important, strategic and historic than an annexation attempt. Such an agreement would will change the rules of the game." Hence, he has pressed the administration to pursue this route strongly (Rosenberg, August 13, 2020).

In the process of shaping these views, the visit of a delegation of Evangelical leaders to the United Arab Emirates in 2018 and the meetings with Emirati officials has formed an important ground. During the meetings, they have exchanged views on the normalization of relations

between Israel and the UAE". Afterwards, Rosenberg has met many times with the UAE Foreign Minister and Ambassador to discuss various issues, from the growing Iranian threat to plans to create an "Arab NATO, from freedom of religion to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. He has stated that he got the impression that UAE was studying on a peace agreement" (Rosenberg, August 13, 2020).

Therefore, as a result of the meetings held with the leaders of Arab countries throughout the region and the ongoing pressure on the American administration to maintain the relevant route, the evangelical groups have had a significant influence on drafting of this agreement. After the evangelical delegation completed their tour in the region, Johnnie Moore, chairman of the Evangelical Advisory Council of Donald Trump, has said that he foresaw peace between Israel and the Sunni Gulf states in a short time. His prediction has come true (Jaffe-Hoffman, August 13, 2020).

Moore have also predicted that other Arab countries such as Bahrain would follow in the the UAE. Bahrain confirmed this expectation on September 11, 2020 (Jaffe-Hoffman, August 13, 2020). After UAE Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed told the Evangelical delegation who visited him in October 2018 that he was ready to make peace with Israel, the U.S. media has started to receive special attention and it has been discovered a "Moderation Treasure" in the UAE. Then, discourses about "how freedom is unfolding in an Arab country" and "how the UAE created an impressive model of religious tolerance" has began to increase (Mitchell, October 31, 2018). Evangelicals once again has tried to legitimize their policies by referring to liberal-secular rhetoric and given the message that they carry the mission of striving for freedom, justice, religious tolerance and a peaceful world.

4.2. Saudi-Israeli Nexus and Iran

Until the Abraham Accords, any formal relationship has not existed between Israel and the Saudi Arabian-led Gulf Cooperation Council. The disclosure of Iran's secret uranium enrichment facility at Natanz in 2002 and the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, have empowered Iran and increased its influence in the region (Lewis, March 3, 2015). In 2004, King II. Abdullah of Jordan has apprised of the emergency of a "Shia Crescent" in the Middle East. In September 2009, the US, Britain, and France have announced that Iran has built a second secret uranium enrichment facility in Fordow, near the Iranian city of Kum, and this development has increased the intensity of the threat perceived by the Gulf states from Iran. With the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011, the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt has raised concerns in Saudi Arabian and UAE administrations. Obama's consent to this situation has consolidated the existing enmity against Islamist movements. The stable deterioration of the civil war in Syria and the increasing role of Iran and Hezbollah in Syria after 2012 has been other factors affecting the rapprochement between Israel and the Gulf states (Cooper, Worth, September 25, 2012).

Following the election of Hassan Rohani as President, the acceleration of nuclear negotiations with Iran and the conclusion of an interim agreement in Geneva in 2013 has been evaluated by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu both negatively and positively. He has said that the threat posed by a nuclear-armed Iran afford an opportunity to overcome historical hostilities and build new relationships" (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 1, 2013). Israel has hoped to increase cooperation with the Arab world against the common Iranian threat. In the same period,

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have agreed with Israel to increase the pressure on U.S. and to develop cooperation between them in this context (Entous, June 18, 2018). On the other hand, cooperation between the Gulf states and Israel has greatly increased during Obama's second Presidency. Saudi Arabia and Israel, excluded by the Obama administration, have deepened their relations in response. A former Israeli official has also pointed to the same point: "Unwittingly, Obama contributed very significantly to the build-up of relations between us and the UAE and the Saudis" (Black, March 19, 2019).

Israel's main goal since 1948 has been to bypass and weaken the Palestinians by establishing prudent relations with the Arab states. In the past, Gulf countries have avoided links with Israel due to the risk of reaction from Arab and Muslim public opinion, but this has changed drastically in recent years. Israeli politicians and officials have begun to talk about intelligence cooperation with Arab states against Iran and the fight against terrorism. In 2010, Meir Dagan, the then Mossad Director, has visited Saudi Arabia based on the strategy of building secret alliances with the Gulf countries in order to carry out operations targeting Iran (Pfeffer, July 26, 2010). In November 2017, it has been revealed that the Chief of General Staff of the Israeli Armed Forces, Gadi Eisenkot, offered intelligence sharing to Saudi Arabia regarding Iran (Aljazeera, 2017). A former senior US diplomat has said that "Israeli intelligence personnel who has visited to these countries, have met with the leaders of Arab countries and knew each other quite well" (Black, March 19, 2019). Hillary Clinton, who has been Secretary of State during Obama's presidency, stated that "she knew that the UAE and Saudi Arabia were working with Mossad to counter Iranian influence (Entous, June 18, 2018). David Meidan, a former Mossad official, has said that "Israel and the Gulf countries were on the same boat" in his interpretation towards the aspects of this cooperation (Black, March 19 2019).

After Mohammed bin Salman was appointed defense minister and deputy crown prince and then advanced to crown prince in 2017, Israeli-Saudi cooperation has gone through even more far-reaching changes. The Crown Prince's messages about Israel during his three-week trip to the US in the spring of 2018 and his rhetoric after meeting with pro-Israel American Jewish leaders that the Palestinians should "accept Trump's proposals" or "shut up and stop complaining" have augured a new period (Aljazeera, April 30, 2018). Salman has made it clear that "the Palestinian problem is not a priority for either the government or the Saudi people." He emphasized much more urgent and important issues like Iran that they need to address (Fars News Agency, 2018). Therefore, with the rise of Salman, positive attitudes towards Israel and hostile attitudes towards Iran have begun to increase.

On the other hand, Bahrain has been the first country to pursue the UAE in normalizing relations with Israel. Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa had previously described the agreement as "a historic step for peace" in the region (Duz, September 21, 2020). This explanation has showed that Saudi Arabia has also agreed with the decision. The subsequent participation of Bahrain in the UAE has been important well because Bahrain could not take such a step without the approval of Saudi Arabia. On the same day, President Trump's senior adviser, Jared Kushner, has said that "many leaders in the region are now tired of waiting for Palestine and want to recognize the reality of Israel". Kushner has said that he believes that the Saudis are waiting to see how the normalization process works before taking action, adding that "Finally, a normalization process is inevitable between Israel and Saudi Arabia" (Ignatius, September 11, 2020)

Although Bahrain and UAE are a significant starting point, the key to the fundamental change is expected to arise through Saudi Arabia. The rise of Iran, the growing feeling of insecurity of autocratic regimes after the Arab Spring, and the fear of their disengagement with the United States have played a role in the development of Arab countries' relations with Israel. However, the target of collective struggle against Iran lies at the bottom of the process that developed with the Abraham Treaty. One of Donald Trump's first foreign policy moves after he became President has been to cancel the nuclear deal with Iran. He has announced that this agreement is “a disaster for Israel” and Iran's “relentless hostility to Israel is one of the most important reasons of his policy to press against Iran (Sanger, Kirkpatrick, May 8, 2018). Secretary of State Pompeo has argued that Iran “made serious attempts to undermine Western civilization, to destroy Israel, the only democratic state of the Middle East, the bible land and the Jewish homeland” (Rosenberg, September 29, 2020).

4.3. Dispensationalist Theology's View on Iran

Dispensationalism regards Trump's policies towards Iran as a way to initiate the return of Christ and foresee that “Iran has a great role to play in the history of the Bible”. Accordingly, Iran would be one of the countries that would attack Israel in the future great war that will launch the End Times (Boyer, 1994, p. 159-166). For example, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, during an interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network in Jerusalem in March 2019, has cited an Iran-based biblical story popular with Dispensationalists. In the story, Evil Counselor Haman urge a Persian king to massacre the Jews, But Jewish Queen Esther, induces him not to do so and she rescue her people. When asked whether he thought Trump could be today's Esther who saved the Jews from Iran, Pompeo has said, “As a Christian, I certainly believe that is possible” (Bailey, March 22, 2019)

Evangelical leader John Hagee has said that “he looks forward to Trump administration confronting Iran”. Trump has sent his top officials to address the audience at the lobbying day of “Christians United for Israel”, founded by Hagee (Bova, August 9, 2018). Pompeo has delivered a speech by saying to the crowd that the Trump administration “has spoken the truth in many ways that previous administrations have not done, and this truth arises from the Bible that he constantly keeps on his desk and read every morning. As part of this “truth”, he has referred to why “the Islamic Republic of Iran is aggressor, not a victim” and how America was fighting against this evil as a good warrior to set a precedent for the whole world (U.S. Department of State, October, 11 2019). In the words of Pompeo, one can find the inspiration that the dispensationalists premillennialists consider the world as a stage on which good and evil fight with each other. Accordingly, the conflict is between God's chosen people and a bigoted enemy who seeks to destroy those people altogether, and it's a zero-sum competition.

On the other hand, both the Gulf countries and Israel has seconded their full support for the US strategy towards Iran. They have urged all Middle East countries to follow the leadership of U.S. while they argued that one should be prevented from Iran's aggression by combining the efforts of the USA and its allies in the region against Iran's expansionist policies. For evangelicals, an Arab support to U.S's policies towards Iran has been of great importance..In a question about the move of the US Embassy to Jerusalem, Pompeo has explained this situation as follows:

“Though I know it grieved many of our Arab friends. That said, it’s worth making this observation: The more the U.S. focuses on Jerusalem going forward, the more we divide our Mideast allies. The more the U.S. focuses on the Iran threat and shows real leadership in countering Tehran’s malign influence, the more we bring our Arab and Israeli friends together in common cause against a serious enemy” (Rosenberg, May 23, 2018).

Consequently, the evangelical influence on the Trump administration and their dispensationalist belief has stood out as one of the salient elements of the US policy of violent repression against Iran and efforts to improve relations between the Gulf countries and Israel. Likewise, the most important point emphasized by the evangelicals in the diplomatic efforts toward the Gulf countries, which prepared the ground for the Abraham Treaty, has been the need for cooperation of the Gulf countries against the Iranian threat.

4.4. Evangelical Diplomacy on Saudi Arabia

The Evangelical delegation, who visited the UAE in 2018, has later attended many meetings throughout the region. In these meetings, American Evangelical leaders have met with Salman in Jeddah in 2019 (Ahmed, October 19, 2019). A statement issued by the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Washington, has said that the two sides exchanged views on “promoting coexistence” and “fighting extremism. The meeting has been sponsored by both the Saudi and US governments, and they have discussed about the “future of Saudi Arabia”. Parties also have addressed the issues including terrorism, freedom of religion, human rights, the geopolitical situation in the Middle East and the peace process (Batrawy, September 11, 2019). Larry Ross, one of the figures within the evangelical delegation, has stated that they were there as “reconciliation ministers in the name of Jesus”. On the other hand, this visit has occurred in September 11th and the leader of the delegation, Joel C. Rosenberg, has responded to criticisms about the timing by saying that “The Saudi Arabia of 18 years ago. The Saudi Arabia out of which Osama Bin Laden came, Al-Qaeda and the radical theology of violent jihad. That Saudi Arabia doesn’t exist anymore. They have made sweeping changes that most Americans, most Christians aren’t aware of,” adding that they have chosen the best time to discuss the route Saudi Arabia is currently heading and what strategy it should pursue forward. Saudi Arabia has been considered as “one of America's most important strategic allies in the combat against radical Islamist terrorism and the rising Iranian threat” (Mitchell, September 13, 2019).

Johnnie Moore, one of Trump’s evangelical advisors and another figure in delegation visited Jeddah in 2018, has expressed his support to Salman's reforms and the Saudis' “Moderate Islam”. After the second visit in 2019, he has not been too enthusiastic in his praise but he has explained that the delegation was satisfied with the developments in Saudi Arabia (Henne, September 13, 2019). Accordingly, evangelicals argue that Saudi Arabia has undergone extensive economic, social, cultural and religious reforms after the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. The visits of the Evangelical delegation has affected this trend. As shown by the examples in the previous section, it has been known for a long time that Israel and Saudi Arabia have secret security ties, as both sides consider Iran as an existential threat, but Saudi Arabia does not officially recognize the Israel. However, after the accords between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, it can be predicted that other Gulf countries and ultimately Saudi Arabia will be involved in this process.

In fact, Saudi Arabia is a country where its behavior for all non-Muslims, including Christians has sparked various debates in the West world. It has adopted an extreme interpretation of Islam as the official religion. For example, according to the “Open Doors World Watch List” report, it is one of the countries where Christians are most persecuted (Casper, January 15, 2020). Considering that one of the main foreign policy priorities of evangelicals throughout history has been international freedom of religion, it seems paradoxical that they take such a positive attitude towards one of the most repressive states in the world. However, a historical continuity can be observed in this inconsistency. Since the presidency of Carter, who is also an evangelical, the USA has adopted a policy promoting human rights all over the world. However, in the Cold War conditions, the US administrations and then-prominent evangelical figures have supported the authoritarian governments in South America and the Middle East, recalling the danger that “supporting human rights and democracy in every country may bring Communism”. The same situation is still valid today. In the eyes of evangelicals, interfaith dialogue policies with the Saudis are seen as an opportunity for the struggle against Iran and for more Arab support to Israel.

5. Conclusion

Evangelicalism has remained deeply rooted in American public life for centuries. But its political influence and visibility have begun to increase especially after the 1970s. This belief has been disseminated in these years by America's ubiquitous religious broadcasters and preachers with the contribution of the proliferation of mass media. The sermons of prominent evangelical leaders have reached millions of people through radio and television. The realization of this great political potential has encouraged evangelicals to be more active in politics. Foreign policy has been an important part of the political agendas of Evangelical groups. Most evangelical Christians in the US are the staunchest supporters of the Israeli government due to a belief based on the End Times prophecy, dispensationalism. This belief had loomed large on the landscape of U.S. evangelicalism in the twentieth century's recent decades and become a bedrock doctrine among Evangelical Christians. According to dispensationalists, Israel has a unique significance in biblical prophecies and to God. Accordingly, the return of the Jews to the holy land before the second coming of the Messiah, the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, and the strengthening of Israel by existing safely within these borders are among the central goals of evangelicals in foreign policy.

The vast majority of evangelicals have voted for Trump in the 2016 Presidential elections. They have continued to support him after the election and have become his most loyal constituency. Evangelicals have highly been represented both within Trump's cabinet and among his close advisors. In parallel with their influence over the White House, Israel and the U.S.'s cooperation became broader and deeper during Trump's presidency. Donald Trump has taken a more pro-Israeli stance regarding Jerusalem than the relatively cautious position adopted by both Republicans and Democrats and linking the movement of the embassy to Jerusalem with a two-state solution and negotiations. Trump has recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017 and moved the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem in 2018. Trump's decision has been a long demanded move for evangelicals who believe that Israel should have full control over Jerusalem as a first step towards the “Second Coming of Christ”. This decision has been one of the most prominent examples of evangelical influence over the Trump administration. Following this, “The Vision

for Peace” plan issued by Donald Trump in 2019 has been another important foreign policy move pioneered by the Trump administration within the framework of dispensationalist conviction that Israel should gain full control over Jerusalem. According to the plan, Israel would have sovereignty over almost all Jerusalem including Old Jerusalem and the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. This framework carries the manifestations of the dispensationalist conviction that Jerusalem is the epicenter of the End Times and doomsday scenarios.

Most recently, Israel and the United Arab Emirates have reached a peace accord led by Trump. Evangelicals' activism has been effective in bringing this accord to the table too. For evangelicals, such a peace treaty has been of a strategic nature due to the expectation that it will change the geopolitical balances in the Middle East in favor of Israel. Therefore, on the one hand, they pressured the Trump administration to adopt this policy, on the other hand, they prepared the infrastructure of this agreement by visiting Gulf countries through various delegations they formed. The common hostility towards Iran and its allies has been the main factor underlying this accord. Besides, Trump's policies towards Iran are a way of initiating the return of Christ for dispensationalists predicting that Iran has a great role to play in Biblical history. Iran is one of the countries that would launch the Armageddon War by attacking Israel. Likewise, many Iranian-centered stories in the Bible have been ascribed to daily political developments. Secretary of State Pompeo and various Evangelical leaders have referred to these stories. Thereby, Iran has been “demonized” and the Trump administration's oppressive policies towards this country have been justified. Evangelical and dispensationalist influence over the Trump administration has stood out as one of the salient elements of the US policy of maximum pressure against Iran and efforts to improve relations between the Gulf states and Israel.

This paper has aimed to show how well known evangelical interest in U.S foreign policy has affected foreign policy decisions toward the Middle East and Israel during Trump's presidency. It has tried to contribute to the development of the relevant literature by examining the participation of evangelicals in foreign policy decisions during Trump's presidency and their activities in this context. The findings of this study show that Evangelical groups adopting dispensationalist belief and Evangelicals figures within the Trump administration have taken a leading part in the move of the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, in the Israel-UAE agreement led by the Trump administration, and in promoting policies that will strengthen the dimensions of cooperation between the Gulf states and Israel.

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