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WASHINGTON (RNS)—In recent years, conservative Christians have emerged as some of the most vocal supporters of the state of Israel—support many Jewish groups have welcomed at a time when they feel Israel is under siege.

One of the loudest voices has been John Hagee, the San Antonio megachurch pastor who recently endorsed John McCain’s White House bid and raised the ire of Catholic groups with statements that even some Jews called vicious and inflammatory.

The Catholic flap has sparked a new round of questions among Jewish groups over the support from Christian Zionists like Hagee. Where is the line between embracing their support and keeping their politics at arm’s length?

John Hagee is pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio and president of Christians United for Israel. Some Jewish groups have struggled to reconcile Hagee's more controversial statements against his strong support for Israel.

“On the one hand, there’s a desire to have as strong a support for Israel as possible,” said Joel Meyers, who heads the Rabbinical Assembly, an umbrella group of Conservative rabbis. “On the other hand, there’s concern that no one wants to back any religious extremist. And some of the comments coming from some of the leaders of the evangelical movement are certainly extreme when they talk about other faiths. That makes a lot of people, including myself, very uneasy.”

Christian Zionism has various interpretations, but the central belief is that

ancient Israel must be restored to bring about Armageddon and the Second Coming of Christ.

Christian Zionists believe Israel's birth in 1948 fulfilled biblical prophecy and an intact Israel also must include Judea and Samaria—the predominantly Pales-tinian West Bank captured by Israel in 1967. As such, they have resisted returning any land to the Palestin-ians as part of a peace deal. And a war with Iran, some say, could usher in Armageddon.

Estimates on the number of Christian Zionists in the United States range from 20 million to 40 million. The movement is mostly evangelical, and its most potent force is Christians United for Israel, established two years ago by Hagee, the pastor of the 18,000-member Cornerstone Church in San Antonio. The group's executive board includes Gary Bauer, Jonathan Falwell and other evangelical leaders.

Hagee, in an interview, said he can “understand” why some Jews would “shy away from Christian support,” but blamed that reluctance on 2,000 years of anti-Semitism, not political or social differences.

“We have made a clean break with the past replacement theology and have embraced the Jewish people for whom the Bible says they are—the apple of God's eye,” Hagee said. “And we would say to our critics you need to take a closer look at 26 years of unconditional support of the Jewish people.”

Many Jewish leaders have been turned off by some statements leaders of the Religious Right have made about Catholics, Muslims and gays. Hagee has stepped away from previous comments that called the Catholic Church “the whore of Babylon” and that seemed to blame Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans' willingness to host a gay parade.

“I am not now, nor have I ever been, an anti-Catholic,” Hagee said, arguing the media have misconstrued his statements. “I have never called the (Catholic) church the Antichrist or a false cult system.” Katrina, he said,

was either a blessing or a curse, and “it was not a blessing, I can tell you that.”

Ohio megachurch pastor Rod Parsley, a director of Christians United for Israel, has said “Islam must be destroyed” and issued a “lock and load” call against spiritual enemies. Hagee has been equally critical of Islam, but said, “my remarks about Islam are always ... about radical Islam.”

Still, Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, said such bombastic rhetoric is bound to raise eyebrows—and concerns.

“I think we need to be very, very reluctant to partner with anyone who isn’t fundamentally respectful towards other religious traditions,” Yoffie said. “His comments on Islam are a legitimate and important factor here when Jewish groups consider whether they should join with him.”

Some Jewish groups have tried to draw a line between Hagee’s views on Israel and his views on practically everything else.

“Will I welcome Hagee’s support? Absolutely,” said Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. “Would I want his endorsement, or would I appear with him? No, because I don’t want to be associated with his positions.”

Some Jewish leaders said they welcome the support of Christian Zionists—but reserve the right to openly and publicly disagree.

“I don’t have to agree with anybody 100 percent in order to welcome their support, as long as their support is not conditioned on my agreeing with them on everything or accepting them 100 percent,” said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

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