

Christians Hail Rightist's Call To Oust Arabs

FORWARD STAFF

WASHINGTON — Thousands of Evangelical Christians waving Israeli flags cheered last week as Knesset member Benny Elon called for the "relocation" of Palestinians from the West Bank into Jordan.

The enthusiastic crowd at the annual convention of the Christian Coalition in Washington also cheered House Majority Whip Tom DeLay, who urged activists to back pro-Israel candidates who "stand unashamedly for Jesus Christ."

Elon, whose Moledet Party advocates the "transfer" of Palestinians to Arab countries, said that a "resettlement" of the Palestinians is prescribed by the Bible.

None of the other high-profile speakers echoed the call for transfer by Elon, a former minister of tourism in Prime Minister Sharon's government and head of the Moledet Party. But they joined him in opposing American and Israeli plans for a Palestinian state — a position well to the right of most American Jews and Jewish organizations on Middle East issues.

The cheers for Elon and DeLay highlight potential pitfalls in the burgeoning political alliance between Jewish pro-Israel activists and evangelicals. While large gaps still divide them on the domestic front, both camps have been working together with increasing comfort on Israel-related issues.

Still, while American Jewish groups have staked out hawkish views on Israeli security issues since the start of the intifada, most organizations fall far short of endorsing the concept of a mass expulsion of Palestinians. Yet Elon received an enthusiastic response when he quoted from the Bible in an attempt to justify the idea.

"If that's what he said, then it is something that should be unacceptable," said Kenneth Jacobson, associate national director of the Anti-Defamation League. "We have criticized that position before and will continue to do so. That's not what the State of Israel is all about."

Jacobson stressed that ADL welcomed and encouraged the evangelical community's show of support for Israel. But, he added, "This kind of thing should have been rejected as soon as it was said."

Several prominent figures who spoke at the event, including DeLay, Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert and Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson, did so before Elon took his turn at the podium. Since the rally, however, none have criticized Elon's call for transfer.

Olmert has rejected the idea of transfer in the past. But, when contacted this week by the Forward, a spokeswoman for Olmert said the mayor would not be commenting on Elon's speech. "The mayor participates in numerous events with numerous speakers, and therefore does not see himself obligated to react to each of their statements," the spokeswoman said.

The mayor, she said, works diligently and equally for the well-being of Jerusalem's Arab and Jewish populations. Therefore, she added, any question regarding his position on transfer "is obviously irrelevant."

The Israeli embassy in Washington also declined to react to Elon's comments. But an Israeli official in Washington said that the government does not endorse Elon's positions. Also, the official pointed out, Elon does not represent the government of Israel.

The Texan was slammed by the National Jewish Democratic Council, which warned that statements like his push for Christian candidates "threaten the atmosphere of religious freedom that our nation is founded upon."

"There should be no religious litmus test before choosing which lever to pull in the voting booth," said Ira Forman, executive director of the Jewish Democratic group. He added, "When it comes to the inclusive, heterogeneous nature of American society and the inherent dangers of religious exclusivism, Tom DeLay still does not get it."

A spokesman in DeLay's office rejected the claim of religious exclusivism, citing many occasions when the Majority Whip spoke out in favor of religious tolerance. The spokesman declined to comment on Elon's remarks.

During his speech last week, Elon quoted from Chapter 33 of Numbers, in which God tells Moses that the children of Israel are meant to inherit the land of Canaan. God then instructs the children of Israel: "Ye shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you... But if ye will not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then shall those that ye let remain of them be as pricks in your eyes, and as thorns in your sides, and they shall vex you in the land wherein ye dwell."

Drawing loud cheers from the audience, Elon said, "I know, we always have to be politically correct, but it is very, very complicated to be politically correct when you have to correct so many political mistakes."

To correct such mistakes, said Elon, an Orthodox rabbi, "Let's turn to the Bible, which says very clearly... we have to resettle them, to relocate them, and to have a Jewish state between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean."

Another Texas Republican, House Majority Leader Dick Armey, made a similar argument in May, during a television interview with Chris Matthews on CNBC.

Israel's government declined to send an official representative to the rally. Instead, it was decided that Olmert, a senior member of the reigning Likud party but not a member of the cabinet, would represent Israel. Olmert fired up the crowd by saying he had come "from the city of God, the place which God made the capital of the Jewish people more than 3,000 years ago," and vowing that the undivided Jerusalem will remain the eternal capital of the Jewish state.

Elon, who was not participating as an official representative of Israel, thanked the crowd "in the name of the people in Israel."

A spokesman for the Christian Coalition, Ross Torossian, said that Elon had been invited as a representative of the Moledet party, "which maintains very close contact with the coalition." He said that many other Knesset members were invited as well, but declined to participate. Torossian refused to comment on Elon's message of "transfer." He declined to indicate if the coalition endorses it or rejects it.

However, a senior official of the Christian Coalition said that the organization was well aware of Elon's ideology when it sent him an invitation. The invitation, he added, was sent not despite of Elon's ideology, but because of it.

Although the Israeli government did not authorize a senior government official to address the coalition's gathering, the Foreign Ministry, Tourism Ministry and Israeli embassy in Washington all had booths at the

convention.

Robertson was the main speaker during the pro-Israel rally, which ended the three-day annual convention. He lashed out at Yasser Arafat, accusing him of having "killed or deported the vast percentage of the Christian population in Bethlehem." Robertson said that "the Palestinian Authority, right now, in my opinion, are a group of mafia-like thugs, who have been imported from Tunisia, and really, Palestine has been occupied by Yasser Arafat and his thugs. We cannot turn that nation over to them."

Dismissing the legitimacy of the Palestinians' claim to the land, and particularly to Jerusalem, Robertson said that "the Palestinians are really Arabs who moved there a few decades ago. Their claim to that land really does not go back very far such as it is," while the claim of the Jews goes back thousands of years. The Temple Mount, he concluded, "belongs to Israel, not to the Palestinians."

The most significant characteristic of this year's Christian Coalition convention was the attempt to graft foreign-policy issues onto the organization's traditional domestic conservative agenda. That fusion of a conservative domestic platform and a hawkish foreign policy agenda was well expressed in the introductory statement of Roberta Combs, national president of the Christian Coalition.

"Our Road to Victory conference will be the largest pro-family event in America, as Christians will don armor for the war on terrorism," Combs said. "We will call on America to safeguard our institutions by returning to the true teachings of the Bible. We will pray for reform of our nation's soul by casting aside abortion, pornography, drugs and other manifestations of moral decline... we set out an agenda to affect social change in America, and want to let the terrorists know that they will not win."

— **Ori Nir** in *Washington*, with additional reporting from **Ami Eden** in *New York*

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