

Politics and Religion in the European Union: Christian Zionist Advocacy in Brussels*

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KEY WORDS

| Brussels-Based Christian Zionist Advocacy | EU Normative Values |
| Offensive and Defensive Lobbying | Holocaust Memorial Day | San Remo Initiative |

ABSTRACT

Recent research has shown that European Christian Zionism is a numerically small, but vigorous, movement that has existed for a number of decades in Europe. By focusing on the European Coalition for Israel (ECI) this article demonstrates that Brussels provides a politically conducive environment for politico-religious lobby groups, where the ECI employs both defensive and offensive strategy in its pro-Israel campaigns. Whilst its lobbying regarding the two-state solution remains largely unsuccessful, its contributions to fighting antisemitism are substantial, thus confirming that successful lobbying by politico-religious organizations in Brussels is conditioned by the EU's normative values.

INTRODUCTION

By presenting the values, networking and strategy of Brussels-based Christian Zionist lobbying, this paper affirms the scholarship about the role that religious organisations play in the politically conducive environment of the European Union (EU), which was afforded by the Article 17 of the 2009 Lisbon Treaty (Foret, 2009; Laudrup, 2009; Luxmore, 2005; Silvestri, 2009; Willaime, 2009). Regarding Christian Zionism specifically it is surprising that it has not been a subject of an academic enquiry to date, considering the importance of the EU's relations with Israel and the fact that the movement is active in nearly all European countries. The existing academic work on Christian Zionism, as helpful as it may be, is focused exclusively on its (past) influence on the American foreign policy (Clark, 2008; Lewis, 2010; Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007; Shindler, 2000; Sizer, 2004;

Weber, 2004), but fails to offer any insights into the normative premise and lobby strategy of European Christian political activism on behalf of Israel. This paper therefore aims to reduce this academic gap by explaining these fundamental blocks, based on the case study of the European Coalition for Israel (ECI), an organisation that is based and operates in Brussels since 2004.

The study was framed within the Policy Network theoretical approach because its affirmation of anti-hierarchical conceptualisation of power provides a suitable analytical tool for the Brussels-based interest groups. It challenges the rationalist institutionalist approach of power maximisation, and explains how policy outcomes are often premised on the network's collectively shared belief system (Borzel, 1997). The political influence of lobby groups in Brussels is hard to identify, both conceptually and in practice, since institutional fluidity defines decision-making, and complexity of institutional functioning

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requires an ongoing presence and education on the part of the lobbyists. This is precisely why Policy Network allows for conceptualisation of European Christian Zionism as a faith-based civil society movement that is capable of occupying a political space beyond the nation-state and uses both defensive and offensive lobby strategy for its aims and goals. As the EU seeks to exert greater political leverage in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, so too the ECI does not restrict itself to lobbying for cultural and economic co-operation between the EU and Israel, but it tries to influence both the Commission and the European Parliament (EP) in matters that pertain to hard politics. Whilst Christian Zionist lobby strategy at the national level is pursued in the context of specific political culture and according to nation-state governmental structures, in Brussels the ECI's quest for influence has to be pursued exclusively within a consensus-building political culture whilst continually engaging in network 'updating' due to anti-hierarchical and often decentralised network functioning.

EU-ISRAEL RELATIONS THROUGH THE CHRISTIAN ZIONIST LENS

As the EU aims to build positive political, economic and cultural relations with the countries in the Mediterranean region through its neighborhood policy (EEAS; Holden, 2009; Johansson-Nogues, 2004), the most vexing question for the EU has been whether to include Islamist parties in the political dialogue and the democratisation process. A dominant academic stream, which questions consistency in the EU's normative discourse and democracy building in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, calls

for the EU's engagement with civil societies that includes Islamist parties as representatives of political Islam and facilitators of political liberalisation and the democratisation process (Asseburg, 2010; Pace and Seeberg, 2010; Burgat, 2009; Pace, 2007; Youngs, 2006). Christian Zionists, in contrast, make no distinction between Islamism and political Islam (in its aims, if not in practice), and regard the EU's ambiguous attitude toward Islamist organisations (e.g. Hizballah), and potential political engagement with Islamist parties (e.g. Hamas) as morally outrageous and politically detrimental to Israel's security, as well as to Europe's interests in the long-run, thus affirming the opposing academic stream that is critical of the pragmatic approach toward Islam/Islamists by the European governments (Caldwell, 2010; Guitta, 2010; Vidino, 2005; Shepherd, 2009).

Secondly, given the close geographical proximity and economic cooperation between the EU and the Mediterranean region, the EU's active role in the Quartet is expected and welcomed, even though the complex institutional segmentation of the EU generates the structural incoherence in the common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (Vogel, 2009; Portela and Raube, 2009). Moreover, the EU's commitment to its normative values and principles that fail to translate into reality on a consistent basis generates debates about their applicability generally (Hyde-Price, 2008; Lucarelli and Menotti, 2006; Orbie, 2008), and the Mediterranean region specifically (Bicchi and Martin, 2006) where the assessment about the EU's role in the Peace Process remains contentious (Assenburg, 2003; Dieckhoff, 2005; Miller, 2011). Although Christian Zionists maintain and somewhat accept that lack of uniform position by the diverse national governments on the issues related to the

Middle East politics and Israel's security often create policies according to a lowest common denominator, their objection is primarily directed at the EU's insistence on, what they term as, the inherently flawed framework of the Peace Process that defines Israel as an occupying force. The legality of Jewish settlements, so their argument goes, is enshrined in international law that was established in San Remo, Italy in 1920 (more below), and the EU's failure to recognise this fact seriously undermines its claims that it is a community based on shared values and law.

Thirdly, whilst the political dimension of Israel's relationship with the EU remains uneasy at best, the economic cooperation, paradoxically, between the two is mostly successful (The Henry Jackson Society, 2014; Herman, 2006; Miller, 2006; Tovias, 2011). For Israel's supporters, including Christian Zionists, this is an area that requires a continual advocacy, for upgrade in the economic agreements in particular, since its frequent politicisation in the EP (Ryness, 2012) has a potential to further undermine the EU-Israel relations. For instance, the Commission's guidelines on the eligibility of the Jewish settlers "for grants, prizes and financial instruments funded by the EU from 2014 onwards"¹, is regarded by Christian supporters as an unwise policy that would hurt both Jews and Palestinians economically, but also damage the Peace Process. Moreover, Christian Zionist criticism of the EU's economic policies is frequently aimed at the EU's lack of consistent application of the conditionality principle that is evident in the EU's lenience toward the Palestinian financial corruption (Buhler, 2005).

In view of such firmly defined positions on the EU's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is unsurprising that a sizable number

of Europe's Christians understood the potential for political influence which extends beyond advocacy on a national institutional level, particularly in the late 1990s when it became apparent that the progressive institutional changes were gradually increasing political leverage of the EP. As a result several Christian Zionist organisations (including the well-known and controversial American organisation ICEJ – The International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem) established in 2004 the first pro-Israel Christian advocacy group, the ECI, in the EP. Since 2008 however the ECI's official member organisations happen to be distinctly European, partly as a matter of its approach to lobbying, and partly for the purpose of retaining a 'European' identity of the ECI.

THE EUROPEAN COALITION FOR ISRAEL (ECI)

The ECI values – Holocaust Remembrance Day

The values which motivate European Christian Zionist advocacy could be distinguished as spiritual, moral and political, with the Christian Zionist core as a defining characteristic in terms of the theological position. In contrast to the American variant, which is almost exclusively right-wing and heavily focused on eschatology, European supporters for Israel have politically diverse views and tend to be less focused on apocalyptic passages in the Bible. In terms of the political context the ECI operates in a unique setting. Whilst other religious representations, which are in essence the outposts of large denominational structures, have carved a significant political space for themselves in Brussels, (Bollmann, 2010; Mihut, 2011), the ECI contends for influence

¹ *Official Journal of the European Union*
<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2013:205:0009:0011:EN:PDF>

as the network that consists of mainly, but not exclusively, Charismatic and Pentecostal groups on the margins of the European Church. This necessitates a certain level of pragmatism where the ECI uses the EU's normative benchmarks, such as human rights, democracy and good governance, as the instrument with which it presents its political positions in the EP and the Commission (King, 2016).

It should be noted that American Christian Zionist influence is quite considerable among European Christians, evidenced by pro-Israel literature authored by American theologians and disseminated at Christian Zionist events in Europe, and by the established transatlantic networks that pursue common goals². Upon greater scrutiny, however, it is apparent that this influence is not as all pervasive as it seems, since European and American Christian Zionism do not share an identical theological ground. The American variant tends to be mostly dispensationalist³, whilst in Europe Christian Zionism is much more historically oriented (Pawson, 2008: 23), and it is not quite as homogenous, as the intensity and degree of its spiritual, political and moral values vary from country to country. Whilst European Christian Zionists are keen on conveying that both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament must be interpreted holistically in order to understand why the second coming of Jesus Christ necessitates the physical return of the Jews from Diaspora to their ancient land,

2 International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem (ICEJ) is an American organisation that was one of the five founding organisations of the ECI. Although it is no longer part of the ECI's structural core, the two organisations continue their cooperation.

3 Dispensationalism rigidly divides human history into (usually) seven dispensations: Innocence, Conscience, Human Government, Promise, Law, Grace, and Millennial Kingdom. The more extreme form of dispensationalism teaches two distinct plans of salvation for Gentiles and the Jews.

at the same time their commitment to non-eschatological matters equally defines, if not more, their advocacy. This is understandable given that moral dimension of European Christian Zionism has been shaped by the centuries-long painful experience of Europe's Jews, and indicates why the ECI's political campaigning is solidly embedded in fighting against resurgent antisemitism in European societies and churches. This twofold normative position allows the organisation to share some spiritual/ideological premises with American Christian Zionists, whilst demarcating itself on other grounds.

Given that the level and intensity of antisemitism in each European country has been shaped in specific historic settings, its current resurgence likewise does not affect all European countries equally, but it is driven by specific socio-cultural changes and political discourses in each country. In order to combat antisemitism therefore, Christian Zionists lobby their national institutions within each country's political and legislative rules and constraints whilst at the same time utilising best national practice at the EU level⁴ where they lobby for institutionalising the eradication of antisemitism. This is done in a clear recognition that the EU's instruments in combating antisemitism are available, though perhaps not as effective as they should be. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is the most prominent one, as is the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), which succeeded the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) in 2007 and regularly collects data and provides analysis of antisemitic crimes. Crucially, the EU's decision in 2008 to criminalise racism and xenophobia

4 Unsurprisingly it is the German Christian Zionist stream that carries greatest moral and political credibility.

in member states⁵ is commended by the ECI as a powerful instrument with which to challenge antisemitism and agitate against the parties and governments that might display antisemitic attitudes.

The ECI's prioritisation of fighting antisemitism stems not only from the theological position that this battle is primarily a duty to God, but Christians in Europe have a historic opportunity to provide a moral leadership where previously they largely failed (Heschel, 2008; Paul, 2004; Wright, 2002). For that reason the Holocaust Remembrance Day, which the ECI initiated in 2005, is regarded as the ECI's major advocacy achievement. The campaign established a close cooperation with the Jewish organisations, most notably the European Jewish Congress (EJC), and it is afforded recognition at the highest level. For instance, the President of the EP Martin Schultz made a decision to outlaw Holocaust denial in the EP and to declare the International Holocaust Remembrance Day as an official parliament event from year 2013.⁶

The ECI values – 2010 San Remo Initiative

In terms of political affiliation, the ECI network consists of groups and individuals from across Europe whose convictions span from centre right to centre left of the political spectrum (King, 2016: 120-141). This includes not only the diverse preferences of the economic models and social policies, but also the diverse attitudes toward the European integration, where a

typical pro-integrationist stance is found among German Christian Zionists in contrast to their British co-religionists who are very skeptical or even opposed. Another interesting fact is that European Christian Zionists seem to be, in contrast to their American 'spiritual cousins', less inclined to agitate for political issues, including those relating to Israel. Some prominent leaders of the European Christian Zionist movement find this problematic since, in their view, Christians should defend Europe's Judeo-Christian heritage, as well as the Jewish state and the Jewish people.⁷

Such a political position is clearly rooted in the 'civilizational clash' paradigm⁸ where, on a narrower level, the reassertion of traditional Christian faith would curb inroads of political Islam into European societies,⁹ but it would also have a broader impact on Europe's relations with the Jewish state whose social and political culture and economic model are very similar, or perhaps even identical, to that of Europe. That is why the ECI periodically challenges the EU for its lax implementation of the conditionality principle in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict¹⁰ which, in their view, impedes the democratisation of the Palestinian society (Buhler, 2005: 10). This demonstrates that the ECI affirms the EU's principled stance and normative commitment regarding its use of

7 Interview with Simon Barrett, 12 April 2012; broadcaster and journalist Revelation TV.

8 A controversial hypothesis by Samuel P. Huntington's that post-Cold War geopolitics will be primarily shaped by conflicts driven by people's cultural and religious identities.

9 The ECI 2010 annual policy conference in the EP was titled "Israel, the EU and the intercultural dialogue: How will the demographic and cultural changes in Europe change relations with Israel?" The participants, including several MEPs, called for reassertion of the Christian faith in Europe's public space.

10 The ECI 2005 annual policy conference in the EP titled "Promoting the reform process in the Middle East – what role can the European Union play?" focused heavily on financial corruption and lack of accountability in the Palestinian Authority.

5 Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia by means of criminal law <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32008F0913:EN:HTML>

6 The ECI, 2013 January 23rd press release, available at http://www.ec4i.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=177:holocaust-memorial-to-become-official-ep-event&catid=74:press-releases&Itemid=53

the economic instrument in its neighborhood policy, but it also demonstrates that the application of the conditionality principle in the resolution of the conflict remains a contentious issue (Assenburg, 2003; Miller, 2011; Ottolenghi, 2010).

In light of the fact that human rights is one of the EU's 'core' foundational values (Manners, 2006), the ECI's fight against antisemitism is an ongoing campaign that increases on the one hand the EU's moral credibility since it evidently presents the organisation's substantial contribution to the EU's 'normative power' self-identification, and on the other hand, the campaign is clearly beneficial to the ECI as it was instrumental for the ECI's accreditation in the EP in 2004. Notwithstanding such success, an area where the ECI encounters difficulty in its pro-Israel advocacy relates to its contextualisation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the interpretation of the United Nations 242 resolution in particular (King, 2016 173-177). This effectively puts the organisation in an adversarial position against the official EU policy on the Palestinian statehood and the Peace Process¹¹. It is pertinent to emphasise that the ECI, contrary to widespread assumptions about Christian Zionist aversion toward a two-state solution, is not opposed to the Palestinian statehood per se. Rather, its objection is premised on a conviction that the solution should be reached through direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians guided by the original agreement in San Remo, Italy about the Jewish settlements and the status of Jerusalem (ibid). In the words of the ECI's Founding Director: "[T]he pledge that was made in San Remo on the 25th April 1920, then affirmed

unanimously by the United Nations in 1922, was then carried over to the United Nations through Article 80, which means that any commitment that the League of Nations made is still valid".¹²Hence the San Remo Initiative, which was launched officially in 2010 in the EP, that carries a central message about the legality of the Jewish state and Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria (the West Bank), Jewish jurisdiction over Jerusalem, as well as rejection of the 1967 lines as the future state borders.

Such stance could be characterised as hawkish and right-wing even though the ECI aims to utilise international law in its advocacy (Wallace, 2012) since it is contrary to the position of the European Court of Justice, as well as the dominant position in academia that declares Israel's policies as immoral and illegal (Ali, 2012; Finkelstein, 2003; Kelman, 2011). Accordingly, the ECI faces considerable difficulties in lobbying the EU officials in the area of hard power politics where its take on Israel's security and conflict resolution is not sufficiently credible to challenge the mainstream interpretation of the international law.

Defensive and offensive lobbying

So how does the Christian Zionist lobbying aim to influence the EU's policy toward Israel? According to David Coen, the Commission is the main institution that the EU interest groups, both private and public, target for their lobbying. They provide reliable information and identify how to become part of the EU policy cycle where they create complex alliances and political presence "via 'gate keeping' and identity-creating functions" (2007: 341). However, successive EU treaties brought gradual institutional changes

11 EEAS (European External Action Service); EU positions on the Middle East peace process http://eeas.europa.eu/mepp/eu-positions/eu_positions_en.htm

12 Interview with Tomas Sandell, 30 May 2011; Founding Director of the ECI.

in the EP to the point where it has become sufficiently empowered to broaden lobby activity by integrating private/public national and sub-national actors into the policy cycle (Kohler-Koch, 1997). This is broadly applicable to the Christian Zionist network in Brussels since the ECI certainly maintains access to the Commissioners from specific policy areas, and has over the years established close partnerships with both Christian and non-Christian groups in and outside of Europe. In addition, it has also formed at times ad hoc alliances, usually to conduct short-term campaigns. Having said that, it is apparent that the ECI prefers to use the EP as its main platform for lobbying, partly in recognition of the growing influence of specialised committees on the legislative process (Bouwen 2004: 482), and partly as an 'investment' into MEPs who could potentially become future high rank influential officials in their national governments.¹³

With this in view it is clear that the ECI is an organisation that organises its lobbying through the access mode. This is also logical given its limited resources in Brussels' highly competitive political environment that hosts well-funded private interests and large public NGOs. However, when the organisation resorts to using the voice mode in its advocacy, i.e. public demonstrations, it is always done in national capitals. The ECI's lobby strategy, therefore, could be categorised at times as defensive and at other instances as offensive, depending on the nature, aims and duration of the ECI campaigns on the one hand, and the combined use of access, the input of national networks, and use of media on the other. It should be noted that either lobbying style is typically conducted by the ECI in a non-adversarial manner, since it exists

within the EU's consensus-building system that is preconditioned by a complex governance model, unlike in Washington DC where lobbying is shaped by its adversarial political culture (Woll, 2012: 193-195; Mahoney, 2007). A combative posture would clearly prove to be counter-productive in Brussels, therefore the Christian Zionist lobbying, as indeed lobbying of all Brussels-based interest groups, must be conducted constructively and emphasise primarily pan-European goals and principles, in this case the eradication of antisemitism.

Most recently established religious associations are still in the process of asserting their influence in Brussels, owing to the fact that they are organisationally less effective in terms of professionalisation and network quality than the well-established ones, such as the Catholic COMECE – the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community and an ecumenical CEC – the Conference of European Churches (De Vlieger, 2012). It is understandable therefore that the defensive lobby strategy is presumably almost non-existent among these groups. This is relatively true with the Christian Zionist advocacy in Brussels. As the only Christian pro-Israel organisation in Brussels, whose stance on the Israeli- Palestinian conflict is substantially different from the EU's official policy, the ECI had to 'break grounds' in many ways and establish itself as a credible lobby organisation in a relatively short time. This is a factor that shapes the ECI's strategy (positions and policy recommendations) most of the time as offensive, though never aggressive in its demands, nor combative in its approach. The 2010 San Remo Initiative is the most substantial example of its offensive approach since the desired outcomes of the campaign are defined as long-term goals and pursued by engaging in the area of international law and

¹³ Interview with Tomas Sandell, 30 May 2011; Founding Director of the ECI

academic research (Wallace, 2012; Grief, 2004). Secondly, the ECI uses primarily access mode in disseminating information through private meetings with officials in national capitals¹⁴ and in Brussels, but it resorts to voice mode also through the extensive use of media, mainly Youtube, the ECI Facebook page and the ECI Twitter account. Thirdly, the ECI's offensive advocacy extends beyond the EU and aims to influence delegations at the UN during the annual General Assemblies sessions (King, 2016: 173-177). Given the constitutive roles that the EU and the UN hold in the Quartet, the ECI's lobbying on the pan-European and international level makes sense, even as it appears too ambitious given that no other pro-Israel organisation uses the League of Nations document to challenge the existing legal and political framework of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution (*ibid*).

Having said that, there are times when the defensive strategy is necessary from the point of view of the ECI, which usually happens when the EU-Israel existing good trade relations are called into question, but also during the times of periodical crisis/military confrontations when Israel faces severe criticism, which according to Christian Zionists nearly always amounts to defamation and delegitimisation of the Jewish state. This was exemplified by the ECI's alliance with the AJC Transatlantic Institute¹⁵ in 2012 that started a 'Pass ACAA'¹⁶ campaign, calling

14 The ECI selected the parliaments of Rome, Paris, London and Tokyo to present their material to policy-makers since Italy, France, Britain and Japan were former members of the Supreme Council of the Principal Allied Powers of the First World War that signed the 1920 San Remo Resolution.

15 The AJC (American Jewish Committee) Transatlantic Institute is a global advocacy organisation based in Brussels, founded in 2004 for the purpose of strengthening ties between Europe and the United States and promoting global security, human rights and Middle East peace.

16 Agreements on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of Industrial Products; ACAA Fact Sheet

on the EU to finalise the pharmaceutical deal between the EU and Israel. It was conducted primarily through the media, and the ECI for its part called on its Facebook members to sign and expand the EU citizen petition, which at the time of the Strasbourg plenary session on 23rd October 2012 numbered over 2,500. Most recent battle, and arguably most important one, in which the ECI had been engaged for some years through the defensive mode, focuses on discrediting Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS), a formidable political force that challenges Israel's political and moral legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

Political influence of religious lobby groups in Brussels is difficult to measure. In the case of the Christian Zionist aspirations it is evident that the ECI's San Remo campaign has failed so far to shift the EU's official position on the Peace Process, future state borders and Jewish settlements. On the other hand, the ECI's commitment to the eradication of antisemitism has achieved recognition and commendation at the EU's highest institutional level. Such discrepancy demonstrates that even though Christian Zionist advocacy remains on the margins of political influence, it has nonetheless secured for itself a sufficient breadth and quality of access at Brussels' policy-making level. The ECI's commitment to both the Christian Zionist spiritual framework and the EU's normative political values evidently shows that a successful acclimatisation of the religious interest representations to Brussels' political culture requires a high level of common normative ground between religious and secular institutions. In other words, the proliferation

<http://passacaa.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/factsheet.pdf>

of religious lobby groups in Brussels is a trend that is embedded in a wider normative shift in Europe where the EU's policies in areas that are of concern to such groups could prove to be either conducive to their goals, or a source of hindrance. The research conducted so far about the level of success of politico-religious NGOs remains modest when compared, for example, to the extensive research that has been done on business interests. This reflects the fact that, in general terms, NGOs arrived late on the Brussels scene and are lacking, according to Karolina Karr, in organisational competence and sufficient funds (2006: 152). This assessment may well be applicable to the religious lobby groups, although it should not be assumed that the acquisition of lobbying skills and resources is necessarily a lengthy process. Research into the ECI has shown that its professionalisation process and resource acquisition was relatively rapid and successful, given that the organisation is numerically small when compared to some other, centrally and hierarchically organised, religious representations (King, 2016: 111-116). Additionally, the ECI's internal structure

and lobby strategy contains a high degree of motivation and coherence that is necessary for competent conduct of pro-Israel campaigns. It is therefore plausible that other such similar politico-religious groups and organisations in Brussels possess organisational capacity, as well as an adequate knowledge of the EU's structural complexity and its anti-hierarchical mode of governance, where they can promote their interests and fully participate in agenda-shaping and decision-making.

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