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SHOW: Fresh Air

DATE: September 18, 2006

TERRY GROSS, host:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross.

When will the world end? My guest, John Hagee, the pastor of a megachurch in San Antonio, Texas, believes the end of days and the Second Coming are imminent. There are 10 prophetic signs of the end time world, he says, and Israel figures into about four of them: plague in the Middle East, the rebirth of Israel, the Jews returning home, and Jerusalem no longer being under gentile control. Earlier this year, Hagee founded Christians United for Israel, an umbrella organization for churches and ministries to support Israel in matters related to biblical issues. In July the group held a Washington summit to introduce the organization to senators and congressman. The goal of the meeting was described on the group's Web site as, quote, "expressing our concerns for Israel's security and our support of Israel's right to the land by biblical mandate." Speakers included Ken Mehlman, the chair of the Republican National Committee, Senator Rick Santorum, and the Israeli ambassador. President Bush sent a recorded greeting. Today we're going to talk about the Christian Zionist movement. Here's an excerpt of a sermon from Pastor Hagee's collection, "Jerusalem: Countdown to Crisis."

(Soundbite from "Jerusalem: Countdown to Crisis" by Pastor John Hagee)

Pastor JOHN HAGEE: In May 1948 Israel was reborn. How many of you were alive on May 15, 1948? It was the most important prophetic day of the 20th century. Why? Because Jesus said in Matthew 24:32 `when you see the fig tree--national Israel--begin to bloom again, know that my coming is nigh at the door. Behold, one generation will not pass away until all things are fulfilled.' We are racing towards the end of time. We are not living in the last days. We're not living in the last hours. We're living in the last minutes of the dispensation of grace. In 1967 the six-day war united Jerusalem under Jewish control. Why is that important? Because the gospel of Luke says when Jerusalem is no longer trodden down by the gentiles, then shall the end come. The Bible says when the Lord builds up Jerusalem, when he builds of Zion, he will appear in all of his glory. So the Bible is screaming, when you see Jerusalem united, when you see it beautified, when you see it built up, the Messiah is coming. And when you see these signs in the heavens and the sun, the moon and the stars and the

waves of the oceans that are roaring, what did God say? He said `Lift up your heads and rejoice! Your redemption draws nigh.' I want you to do it, Cornerstone. Rejoice! The King of Glory is on the way.

(Soundbite of congregation cheering and clapping)

(End of soundbite)

GROSS: We'll hear from Pastor Hagee later on the show. My first guest, Gershon Gorenberg, is an Israeli journalist who wrote about the Christian Zionist movement in his book "The End of Days." His latest book is "The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of the Settlements." He's also Jerusalem bureau chief for The Forward and a senior correspondent for the American Prospect.

Mr. GERSHOM GORENBERG: Well, I would say that, in the first place, it's something of a contradiction in terms because the people who promote the idea of Christian Zionism are looking at Israel in mythological terms. They're seeing the Jews as actors in a Christian drama leading toward the end of days. Real Zionism, as a Jewish movement, is a movement aimed at taking Jews out of the mythological realm and making them into normal actors in history, controlling their fate and acting for pragmatic reasons connected to the here and now. So what's called Christian Zionism is actually very distant from Zionism.

GROSS: What are the specific political and territorial goals that you think Christian Zionists have for Israel?

Mr. GORENBERG: Well, they take a position on Israel and on the Middle East that would put them at the far age of the radical right within Israeli politics. They're opposed to any concession whatsoever of land for peace. They tend to treat any process leading towards peace as an illusion, if not a conspiracy. Some of their leaders, at various times, have spoken explicitly of the idea of expelling the Palestinians from the West Bank. These are all positions that, as I said, would put them on the radical right within Israel. They're deeply opposed to the idea of a Palestinian state. They tend to support military action over diplomacy. It's worth stressing that this puts them far from the mainstream of Israeli politics.

GROSS: Do you think Christian Zionists have clout politically in Israel, and if so, with who?

Mr. GORENBERG: Their clout is in their impact on the politics of the United States, which is Israel's key strategic ally. To the extent that they can affect the Congress and the administration's attitude toward diplomacy, toward military action in the Middle East, they have a very strong effect on what happens to Israel. If they can push the American administration away from

diplomatic effort towards peace because of the so-called "danger" that Israel would give up land, if they can express support for military moves rather than diplomatic moves, they will have a strong effect on what happens to Israel. And therefore, their support and their lobbying activity and their political activism is encouraged by Israeli politicians on the far right.

GROSS: Christian Zionists have raised millions of dollars for Israel. How has that money been used and is that money controversial?

Mr. GORENBERG: It has created controversy at times because sometimes the fund-raising methods used present an image of Israel as a poverty-stricken country, something which is offensive to Israelis. There was a complaint very recently by an Israeli diplomat in the United States about fund-raising methods of that sort. Occasionally there are also complaints that various Christian Zionist groups have raised money for causes which are more controversial politically, such as the West Bank settlements or for radical right groups such as the Temple Mount Faithful, a group which supports the idea of building the Jewish temple where the Muslim shrines now stand in Jerusalem and which is a radical fringe group in Israel and which often appeals for support from Christian Rightists in the United States.

GROSS: I've spoken to some Jewish Americans who consider themselves, you know, aligned with Christian Zionists and I asked, 'Well, do you think it's in your ultimate best interests to be aligned with groups whose ultimate goal is the Second Coming of Jesus?' And--to which they've responded, 'Well, we as Jews know that that's not the real truth. That's not going to happen, so why not have an alliance with people who support the same goals for Israel that we do?' You know, the same kind of political goals? And why not support people who just are going to back Israel and back the protection of Israel? What would you say to that?

Mr. GORENBERG: I think that, first of all, there's a tremendous disrespect implied here, strange as it may seem, for the beliefs of the Christian Zionists. These are people who live very much by their theology, and this attitude says, 'Their theology is irrelevant to me. I'm not relating to them as believing people.' So I find that ironic. The second thing is I think that there's a misunderstanding here of what an apocalyptic vision is. When somebody says that they're hoping for the end of history, for God to come and fix the world, they're saying that they see something broken in the world as it is today. And the question, when you look at such a vision, is what does it reflect about what people think about today's world? Part of the end of days vision of the Christian Zionists is that the Jews will die or convert to Christianity. So what they're saying about the world today is they don't see Judaism as a legitimate religion, and I think it's strange for Jewish groups to align themselves with people who show, shall I say, a theological hostility for Judaism.

GROSS: When you say that, you know, in this scenario of the Rapture, Jews will either convert or die, my interpretation of that--my understanding of that is that, in this version of the Rapture, that all Christian believers immediately ascend to heaven and everybody else is--they can either convert and ascend to heaven, too, or they remain on earth for the tribulations, which is a series of plagues and famines and wars and other catastrophes.

Mr. GORENBERG: Yes, that is true. This is a view of all so-called nonbelievers, but normally in the documents of this religious stream there's a particular focus on the Jews because, for this form of theologically ultra-conservative Christianity, one of the great scandals remains that the Jews have not accepted Christianity. They believe that a literal reading of the Bible necessarily, in their eyes, leads to an acceptance of Christianity. The Jews are the keepers of the Hebrew Bible, and it's stunning that the Jews continue to refuse to read the Bible in what they consider to be its simple meaning that would lead to Christianity. This is the cognitive dissonance which is at the core of their beliefs, and they expect the end of days to resolve this dissonance.

I would add one more thing about these kind of scenarios. If you read their literature, they inevitably end up with the battle of Armageddon on Israeli soil. All events are expected to lead to this immense conflict which will take place in Israel. The verse that's cited over and over again is the--sorry, 'The blood will flow as high as the horse's bridle.' So they're expecting war and conflict, and they're seeing this as something positive. Everything that would lead toward Middle East peace, they see as an illusion. For Israelis looking toward their country's security in future in this world, in history as it continues, the most necessary step for us is finding the way to peace. So the people who are proclaiming their support for Israel are actually working at cross-purposes to Israeli interests and needs.

GROSS: Gershom Gorenberg, thank you very much for talking with us.

Mr. GORENBERG: It's been my pleasure.

GROSS: Gershom Gorenberg is the author of the books "The End of Days" and "The Accidental Empire."

Coming up, journalist Max Blumenthal. He's written in The Nation about Christians United for Israel. This is FRESH AIR.

(Announcements)

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TERRY GROSS, host:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross.

We're talking about the Christian Zionist movement. Later we'll hear from the founder of Christians United for Israel, Pastor John Hagee, who believes the rebirth of Israel is a prelude to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

My next guest, Max Blumenthal, is a journalist whose articles about religion and politics have been published in The Nation. In August he wrote about Christians United for Israel.

Before we hear from Blumenthal, here's another excerpt of a sermon from Pastor Hagee's collection, "Jerusalem: Countdown to Crisis."

(Soundbite from "Jerusalem: Countdown to Crisis" by Pastor John Hagee)

Pastor HAGEE: Quickly, the seven signs of his coming. The first sign is the rebirth of Israel. Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 24:32, `Now learn the parable about the fig tree, which is Israel. When you see the branch begin to bloom again--bloom again means that it was dead for a while--you will know that my coming is even at the door. Now, in the Bible when you say that, that means his hand is on the doorknob. When the Romans crushed Jerusalem in 70 AD, diaspora began. The fig tree figuratively died. On May 15, 1948, the fig tree was reborn in a day, as prophesied by Isaiah 66 and 8. The tree is blooming again. Israel is alive. Israel is alive. Israel is alive. The king of glory is on his way. If you listen closely, you can hear the footsteps of Messiah shuffling through the clouds of heaven. Messiah is coming! Messiah is coming! Messiah is coming! And he will be King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Give him praise and glory in the house of God.

(End of soundbite)

GROSS: Christians United for Israel is a new organization. How would you describe it?

Mr. MAX BLUMENTHAL: Christians United for Israel is a lobbying organization created by Pastor John Hagee to advance his Armageddon-based foreign policy views. It's basically an umbrella group that encompasses some of the leaders of the largest Christian Zionist megachurchs across the country. They include Rod Parsley, the Pentecostal faith healer from Ohio who's close to the gubernatorial candidate there, Ken Blackwell, Jerry Falwell, Gary Bauer, some of the major evangelical figures in the country. And they've hired a lobbyist in Washington named David Brog who's Jewish, and David Brog's the former chief of staff to Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Arlen Specter, the Republican. And Brog has a lot of connections in Washington. He's brought evangelical Christian Zionists to the White House for meetings, and he is working with

AIPAC, the major pro-Israel lobbying organization there.

GROSS: How would you describe Christians United for Israel's policy goals?

Mr. BLUMENTHAL: Well, their policy goals are even more extreme than those of the right wing of the pro-Israel lobbying community. Their lobbying goals, I would say, reflect the views that John Hagee has expressed in his books, like "Jerusalem Countdown," where he calls for a nuclear showdown with Iran, where he says Israel and America must confront Iran and wage a pre-emptive strike on Iran and to not do so is to risk committing national suicide. They've lobbied against the Roadmap to Peace, and I would argue that they've helped torpedo the Roadmap for Peace. They have--they did an extensive lobbying push during Israel's offensive against Hezbollah to make sure that a cease-fire was off the table, and David Brog, their lobbyist, told me that they believe that was their principal achievement during this war, was keeping a cease-fire off the table for a month so Israel could do what it wanted in Lebanon.

GROSS: When you say that you think the Christians Zionist Movement is powerful, how much access do you think the movement actually has to the Bush administration or to influential members of Congress?

Mr. BLUMENTHAL: Well, they have enormous influence in Republican-dominated Washington. I don't they they have anywhere near the influence of AIPAC, because AIPAC can work both aisles, you know, of Congress.

GROSS: AIPAC is the American Israeli Public Action Group--the Public Action Committee.

Mr. MAX BLUMENTHAL: Right. It's the major face of the so-called Israel lobby, and, you know, AIPAC can even work with third-party candidates like Joseph Lieberman now. Christians United for Israel comprises, you know, a major component of the Christian right, which also has, you know, gay marriage and abortion as major issues. So the question is how much, you know, to what extent is Israel on the radar of right wing evangelicals? And Christians United for Israel is trying to elevate that, trying to cultivate evangelicals to become more interested in Israel and more interested in, you know, foreign affairs. And, you know, to that extent they do have some influence in the Bush administration because they are--they do comprise the major constituency of the Bush administration, and they do comprise probably the only sector of American society that still supports Bush's war in Iraq without question. And so, over the past few months, the White House has convened a series of off-the-record meetings through CUFI's lobbyist, David Brog with, you know, CUFI board members like Falwell and like Hagee.

GROSS: What are some of the ways that current events in the Middle East fit into the end times theology of Christian Zionists?

Mr. BLUMENTHAL: In terms of the book of Ezekial, specifically chapters 38 and 39, and, you know, this book predicts an inferno that will explode across the Middle East, plunging the world toward Armageddon. At least that's how Hagee explained it in his book "Jerusalem Countdown." And he has said, you know, 'We're living in the last days. These are the most exciting times in church history' when explaining the book of Ezekial. Now, it's sort of a bizarre scenario that he's predicted. Now, first, Middle Eastern armies are going to have to come against Israel. They're going to attack Israel in this scenario, in their explanation of the book of Ezekial. Then Russia will join the invasion, and they will attempt to, you know, attack Israel with their air force, but God, according to Hagee, will wipe out all but one-sixth of the Russian-led Army, and the world will watch, as he says, with shock and awe. What will happen after Russia's army is destroyed is that he predicts that Americans who live on the coastlands who refuse to defend Israel from the Russian invasion will experience nuclear warfare. And in the void that's left after the destruction of Russia, he predicts a one-world government, a one world currency, and a one-world religion that will last for almost four years, and then the Antichrist will be confronted by a false prophet, and they'll wage battle on the Mount of Megiddo, where he takes his followers each year in Israel. And this is, you know, obviously, the anti-Christ will lose the battle, will usher in the reign of, you know, the kingdom of Christ, the Rapture and--so this is how he has explained, you know, the current conflict and many conflicts in the Middle East. You know, obviously, you have US troops walking along the river Euphrates, which is of enormous biblical significance to Christian Zionists. Sounds bizarre, but many people accept these explanations and they, you know, in the context of these explanations, they celebrate wars in the Middle East.

GROSS: Where would you say that John Hagee fits in terms of the larger Christian Zionist movement and in terms of just the larger evangelical movement in the United States?

Mr. BLUMENTHAL: I would consider John Hagee one of the 10 most influential evangelical political leaders in the United States, just because of the size of his congregation and his influence within the Republican Party. I mean, you know, one example of his influence is that he was able to hire the top lobbyist in Texas to exempt his ranch from water restrictions in Texas. And he, you know, in terms of the Christian Zionist movement, is obviously vying for, you know, vying to be at the helm of this movement with Christians United for Israel. He's an enormous--he's a best-selling author, and so I think he's someone to watch in the future. Even though he doesn't have the same name recognition as Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson, he's arguably more influential from a political point of view.

GROSS: Well, Max Blumenthal, thank you very much for talking with us.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL: Well, thanks for having me.

GROSS: Max Blumenthal has written for The Nation and Salon. He's a research fellow at Media Matters for America. We'll talk with Pastor John Hagee in the second half of the show. I'm Terry Gross and this is FRESH AIR.

(Soundbite of music)

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TERRY GROSS, host:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. My guest, John Hagee, believes the end of days, the Rapture, and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ are imminent. He says the rebirth of Israel, the restoration of Jerusalem, is a prelude to the return of the Lord. His best-selling book, "Jerusalem Countdown" describes what else needs to happen in Israel before Jesus returns. Earlier this year, Hagee founded the group Christians United for Israel. It supports Israel's right to the land by biblical mandate. At its kickoff banquet in July speakers included Ken Mehlman, chair of the Republican National Committee, and Senators Rick Santorum and Sam Brownback. President Bush sent recorded greetings. John Hagee is the pastor of a megachurch in San Antonio, Texas, and has his own television ministry. Here's an excerpt from his collection of sermons "Jerusalem: Countdown to Crisis," describing what will happen just before the end of days and the Second Coming.

(Soundbite from "Jerusalem: Countdown to Crisis" by Pastor John Hagee)

Pastor HAGEE: In two minutes, let me tell you where we're going from here. This prophetic portrait paints the following sequence of event for the future. America and Europe become weakened and cannot respond to Israel in the time that Russia and the Arab invasion begins against Israel. This is God's plan. Why? Because he wants the Jewish people in Israel and around the world to know that he, the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob saved them, not America.

Secondly, Russia with Arab allies will plot and plan Israel's destruction. That's happening right now. It has been happening for 10 years. Iran's nuclear weapons have been produced with Russian scientists. The Islamic Arabs are using the Roadmap to Peace to get all of the land of Israel they can get. And when Israel finally says, 'Enough!' you're going to see the beginning of the implementation of Ezekial's war in 38:39. The critical point is the church is raptured before this war begins. I am telling you that makes this message one of the most thrilling prophetic messages you've ever heard in your life. You could get raptured out of this building before I get through finished preaching. We are that close to the coming of the Son of Man.



(Soundbite of cheers, clapping)

(End of soundbite)

GROSS: Pastor Hagee, you say that when Israel finally says `Enough!' to attempts to take its land, you'll see the beginning of the implementation of Ezekial's war. What is Ezekial's war?

Pastor HAGEE: Ezekial's war in chapters 38 and 39, it's known in the Bible as the war of Gog and Magog. And in Ezekial 36, God gives the promise to the Jewish people that he's going to bring them out of their gentile graves. This was given through the prophet Ezekial when the Jewish people were in captivity. In 37 there is the dramatic presentation of the Valley of Dry Bones that come together to become an exceeding great army. This is a physical portrait of the nation of Israel that has been, if you will, in Death Valley for almost 2,000 years because, from the diaspora of 70 AD until the re-entrance into Israel May 15th, 1948, they were in gentile graves. And then in Ezekial 38 and 39, the prophet Ezekial very explicitly describes the war that's going to happen at some point in our future where Russia organizes Islamic nations to come against the state of Israel, and the end result of that war is that God himself is going to stand up and defend Israel, and the enemies of Israel are going to be crushed in such a dynamic fashion, quite similar to pharaoh and the Red Sea, that all of Israel will recognize that God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is indeed the Lord.

GROSS: In your interpretation of biblical prophecy, what has to happen in Israel before the Rapture.

Pastor HAGEE: Nothing. Absolutely nothing. There is no Bible prophecy that needs to be fulfilled before the Rapture of the church.

GROSS: But there's things you don't want to happen. You've said that you don't want Jerusalem to be divided as any part of any peace plan. You didn't want Israel to withdraw from Gaza, and you don't want it to give up any territory in the West Bank. Why not?

Pastor HAGEE: Because the Bible has a very specific verse in Joel, the third chapter and the second verse that says almost verbatim what I'm going to quote to you based on which translation you will be reading, and the Bible says, that `I the Lord will cause the nations to come down to the valley of Jehosaphat for judgment, and the reason that I'm going to judge the nations is because they have divided up my land and my heritage, the people of Israel.' So that verse very clearly says that any nation that forces Israel to divide up their land will experience the judgment of God.

GROSS: And what will happen during the Rapture?

Pastor HAGEE: What will happen during the Rapture is that Paul writes in the New Testament that in a moment in the twinkling of an eye the dead in Christ shall rise and we which are alive and remain shall be caught up to be with the Lord in the air. That means instantaneously every believer will leave this earth.

GROSS: Now, most Christians who believe in the Rapture believe that the believers who will be raptured are Christian believers.

Pastor HAGEE: It's a misnomer for the Baptists, the Presbyterians, the Catholics, the Pentecostals, the Methodists, whomever. I know when you hear their preachers preach, you get the idea they're the only ones going to heaven. That's one of the reasons I have a nondenominational church. I was raised in a denomination, and many times I heard the exploits of the denominations being touted more highly than the exploits of God himself, but there is no market on who's going to heaven, only God himself knows who those people are who are walking and living as they should.

GROSS: But everyone else who I've heard talk about the Rapture believes that it's Christian believers who will go to heaven. Jews, Muslims, nonbelievers will be left behind to face the tribulations on earth.

Pastor HAGEE: Well, there are Jewish people who believe in Jesus Christ, and there are Arabs who believe in Jesus Christ, so you don't have to be a gentile to be a believer.

GROSS: But you do have to believe in Jesus Christ.

Pastor HAGEE: Yes you do, to be a part of the Rapture.

GROSS: So where does that leave the Israeli Jews who don't believe in Jesus Christ when the Rapture comes?

Pastor HAGEE: Where that leaves them is that during the tribulation, the book of Revelation says in the 14th chapter that God is going to send angels who will preach the everlasting gospel across the face of the earth so that everyone will have the opportunity of knowing who Jesus Christ is. Now, when it comes to the Jesus people, Zechariah very clearly says that they are not going to believe that Jesus Christ is the Messiah until they see him. Zechariah says in the 14th chapter `and when they, the Jewish people, see him whom they have pierced'--and the word pierced there actually refers to his rib and side--`when they see him whom they have pierced, they will weep as one weeps for his only son for a period of one week. They're simply not going to believe he is the Messiah until they actually see him, and that's at the Second Coming. Then, at

that point in time, there is the judgment of the nations in which all nations are judged for the way in which they have treated the nation of Israel and the Jewish people, and the Jewish people are front and center in the kingdom of God that will be an eternal kingdom.

GROSS: Now, your group, Christian Zionists for Israel, supports Israel, but your critics say that you don't really have Israel's best interest at heart because your agenda is the Rapture and the Second Coming of Christ, and you believe that Christ's Second Coming is imminent, and when it happens, Jews will see the truth of that and will convert to Christianity. So again, your critics say that scenario does not have the best interests of the Jewish people or of Israel at heart. What would your response be to that?

Pastor HAGEE: My response is that they're mistaken. For 25 years I have been doing an event called A Night to Honor Israel, and the total purpose of the Night to Honor Israel is to bring Christians and Jews together in a municipal auditorium--now they meet at my church here in the city--and to present a message of hope, a message of appreciation from Christians to Jews for the Jewish contribution to Christianity, which I mentioned to you earlier. There is nothing said or done in that service that targets Jews for conversion or trying to bring them into the church, and the total purpose of the Night to Honor Israel is to raise funds to benefit orphans, to bring Jewish people from around the world to Israel who wish to immigrate to Israel, to help build absorption centers where the Jewish people coming from around the world can learn the Hebrew language and be taught a trade, the giving to hospitals and to organizations throughout the state of Israel that benefit the Jewish people. We have given millions of dollars over 25 years and brought over 12,000 people to Israel from the four corners of the earth who would not have gotten there. So people who say that our objective is not to help Israel are simply mistaken.

GROSS: You opposed the Roadmap for Peace which required land for peace. You've said that giving up the West Bank or part of Jerusalem violates the word of God. How does it?

Pastor HAGEE: Joel 3:2 says do not do it. Those who divide up the land of Israel will come under the judgment of God. Therefore, don't do it. It's just that simple.

GROSS: What about Israelis who want a practical solution to living in peace in the Middle East and who believe that land for peace might be a viable, perhaps the only really viable solution. Would you say you can't do that because of what the Bible says?

Pastor HAGEE: No. No. I'm not saying I'm forcing my beliefs on you. But look at it from a basic analysis of common intelligence. You only do something because it benefits you. You negotiate something because you get something from the

negotiation. Show me one time in Israel's history in the past 58 years when giving land has brought them peace, and I'll say that they would have point in logic. But at this point in time, they've given away Jordan, they've given away the Sinai Peninsula, they have given away Gaza, they have backed out of Lebanon. It has benefited them not one iota. It hasn't brought them one day of peace. It has brought them nothing but additional military confrontation. And I am predicting on this telecast that the cease-fire that now exists will collapse and crumble as soon as Hamas and Hezbollah are re-armed from Iran through Syria and through Egypt, and the war will start again with more violence than we've ever seen in the Middle East, and principally because we've given these land bases away to become nothing but a base for global terrorism, 1,000 yards from the walls of Jerusalem.

GROSS: My guest is John Hagee, founder of Christians United for Israel. We'll talk more after a break. This is FRESH AIR.

(Announcements)

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is Pastor John Hagee, the founder of Christians United for Israel. He believes the rebirth of Israel is a prelude to the Second Coming. Here's an excerpt of a sermon from Pastor Hagee's collection "Jerusalem: Countdown to Crisis."

(Soundbite from "Jerusalem: Countdown to Crisis" by Pastor John Hagee)

Pastor HAGEE: For those of you who are in Washington, Jerusalem is not up for negotiation with anyone for any reason at any time in the future, regardless of what your Roadmap of Peace calls for. There are people in this nation who still believe the Bible takes precedent over Washington, DC.

(End of soundbite)

GROSS: Pastor Hagee, if you believe that the Bible takes precedence over Washington, DC, I would assume maybe you'd think the Bible takes precedence over the Israeli government as well. If you use the Bible as the basis of policy, is there any room for compromise? And if you use the Bible as the basis for policy, then should Muslims be using the Quran as the basis of their policy? And again, what possible room for compromise is there at that point?

Pastor HAGEE: There's really no room for compromise between radical Islam and...

GROSS: I'm not talking about radical Islam. I'm just talking about Islam in general.

Pastor HAGEE: Well, Islam in general, those who live by the Quran have a

scriptural mandate to kill Christians and Jews. Now, I had an Islamic on my television show last week. His name was Walid Shoebat. He was raised as a Palestinian terrorist and, at one time, was--placed a bomb and was supposed to walk into a bank. And I said, 'Walid, I'm trying to understand the definition of what is a radical Islamic person because I've read many books, many magazines and I can't come up with a good definition of what constitutes a radical Islamic.' And he says these words, and I'll quote them, he said, 'Anyone who truly believes the Quran is willing to kill Christians or Jews. That's waging jihad.' He said now, 'Those people who are willing to go into another country and start a war will only be about 15 to 20 percent of Islam.'

There are 1.3 billion people who follow the Islamic faith, so if you're saying there's only 15 percent that want to come to America or invade Israel to crush it, you're only talking about 200 million people. That's far more than Hitler and Japan and Italy and all of the axis powers in World War II had under arms. That is a massive number of people. So while we may define radical Islam as a minority, because there are so many, it is still an overpowering military potential.

GROSS: But what you said is that all Muslims have a mandate to kill Christians and Jews. Do you believe that?

Pastor HAGEE: Well, the Quran teaches that. Yes, it teaches that very clearly.

GROSS: So, for you, there's absolutely no way of tolerating Islam at all. I'm not talking about extreme Islam. I'm just talking about the Muslim religion.

Pastor HAGEE: No, there are Islamics who want peace, but they don't have center stage right now. And whenever Islam, radical Islam, does things that make the headlines, like getting on a bus with a bomb strapped around them and killing people, the moderates do not speak up because they're afraid that they will be killed by the radicals. So it gives the appearance that there are no--there is--there are no moderate Islamic people. I've been to Israel 21 times. I've gone to visit Islamic people who I consider to be peaceful. They want peace as much as I do, and they're terrified. The particular businessman that I talked to has sent his five children to California because he's afraid that he will be burned out of his business because he's not extreme enough. And he asked me if I would pray with him, but would I please come into his office, shut the door, and put the blind down before I did so because he's afraid of being seen in any kind of association with a Christian. Now, that's not what you call an environment of tranquility.

GROSS: Are there wars in the Middle East prophesied in the Bible, do you think, before the Rapture and the Second Coming?

Pastor HAGEE: The Bible makes a very general statement that there will be wars

and rumors of wars, and then, in another instance, it refers to the wars as being like a woman who is in the process of having a baby. In other words, where the contracts begin and once the contractions begin in these series of wars, just as in having a baby, the contractions become more severe until the baby is born, so will the contractions--so will these military wards become more severe before the end of the age. So I believe that we have entered into this point of time and where there will be one war that follows another and each one of them will be more severe than the other until we finally reach the battle of Armageddon, where there is a massive military entourage fighting for global supremacy in the Middle East.

GROSS: Did the war between Israel and Hezbollah fit into those contractions that you were talking about?

Pastor HAGEE: I'd certainly say yes to that. I certainly do, and I believe that they are going to continue. As I said earlier, I am absolutely sure that this cease-fire will fail, and then, in a matter of months, they'll be back at war. As soon as Iran re-arms Hezbollah and re-arms Hamas, they will come after Israel one more time.

GROSS: My guest is John Hagee, founder of Christians United for Israel. We'll talk more after a break. This is FRESH AIR.

(Announcements)

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is pastor John Hagee. He's the founder of Christians United for Israel.

How much influence do you think your group has now within the Bush administration or in Congress?

Pastor HAGEE: Well, let me say that we organized on February the 7th of this year, and we met together with 400 leading evangelicals that I invited from across the nation to come to Cornerstone Church, and we wanted, together, to establish that Israel needed for the Christians of America to speak with one voice, to speak very clearly, to speak intelligently and to speak decisively. And so we organized and went to Washington for the first time July the 18th and 19th, just five short months after we organized, and we took 3500 people with us. And actually 3700 people came, but we didn't have room for them. They just came, quote, "in faith" that they could find a chair. But the next day we went to Congress and we met with senators and we met with congressmen, and we told them that the Christians of America were coming together in an organized fashion to speak with one voice, that they would be coming back from year to year, and that we would be coming back to express our concerns on behalf of the state of Israel. They were quite glad to receive us. They were surprised that we came--so many of us came, but they very gladly received us.

GROSS: Would you like to convince American Christian groups that Israel should be a more important part of their agenda?

Pastor HAGEE: I would like to convince American Christians that they have Bible mandate to support Israel, to pray for Israel, to speak up for the peace of Israel, to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, and to be a blessing to the Jewish people because that is the biblical mandate that we have. We may have a political difference with the prime minister, and I have made this very clear to Prime Minister Olmert. I wrote him a letter shortly after he was elected and wished him well and told him that he would be in my prayers and my thoughts, and I wished him every success and this was before the war began. But I said in that letter very specifically that 'I must disagree with your policy of giving land away to the terrorists organizations,' and he has a political philosophy that disagrees with the biblical position that we have, and we'll just agree to disagree. But meantime, we're going forward, we're doing everything that we can to benefit the people of Israel, to bless the people of Israel, because they are, in fact, the nation.

GROSS: I just want to ask you one question based on one of your sermons that--and this isn't about Israel. You said after Hurricane Katrina that it was an act of God, and you said "when you violate God's will long enough, the judgment of God comes to you. Katrina is an act of God for a society that is becoming Sodom and Gomorrah reborn." Do you still think that Katrina is punishment from God for a society that's becoming like Sodom and Gomorrah?

Pastor HAGEE: All hurricanes are acts of God because God controls the heavens. I believe that New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God, and they are--were recipients of the judgment of God for that. The newspaper carried the story in our local area that was not carried nationally that there was to be a homosexual parade on the Monday that the Katrina came, and the promise of that parade was that it was going to reach a level of sexuality never demonstrated before in any of the other Gay Pride parades. So I believe that the judgment of God is a very real thing. I know that there are people who demure from that, but I believe that the Bible teaches that when you violate the law of God, that God brings punishment sometimes before the day of judgment, and I believe that the Hurricane Katrina was, in fact, the judgment of God against the city of New Orleans.

GROSS: So I know you're very opposed to homosexuality, but you think that the whole city was punished because of things like the forthcoming Gay Pride parade.

Pastor HAGEE: This is true. All of the city was punished because of the sin that happened there in that city.

GROSS: You said that we could get raptured any second. In one of your sermons you basically said we could get raptured before this sermon is even over. What are you doing to prepare?

Pastor HAGEE: I'm doing what I do every day. I live right. I read the Bible. I pray. I try to treat other people like I would like to be treated. And I'm going to leave the rest to the grace of God.

GROSS: And do you still believe it's imminent?

Pastor HAGEE: Oh, I do. I do. I do, I do.

GROSS: And my imminent, any second? Any moment?

Pastor HAGEE: I would not be at all surprised if I saw the Lord before the day ended today, but if he doesn't come today, 10 years from now I'll be looking for him with the same intensity.

GROSS: Pastor Hagee, thank you very much for talking with us.

Pastor HAGEE: Thank you, Terry. Thank you for the opportunity.

GROSS: John Hagee is founder of Christians United for Israel and the pastor of the Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas. Earlier in the show we talked about Christian Zionism with two journalists critical of the movement, Gershom Gorenberg and Max Blumenthal.

(Credits)

GROSS: I'm Terry Gross.