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## Geopolitics or Human Rights?

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## Geopolitics or Human Rights?

### Abstract

George Soros' article, "On Israel, America and AIPAC" serves as a sobering reminder that the human rights revolution is constantly being scuttled by geopolitics that not only sideline human rights, but more devastatingly undermine their premises. I happen to agree with him that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is a major obstacle to the U.S. normalizing relations with any country in the Middle East, including and especially Israel. AIPAC is something of a misnomer because it is a coalition, not a committee, and some of its key members include neo-cons, as Soros mentions, as well as Christian evangelicals. AIPAC has long been powerful in influencing American foreign policy with respect to Israel and the Middle East, but never as powerful as it is now with the Bush administration.

### Keywords

Human rights, United States, Israel, Palestine, American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC)

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## Geopolitics or Human Rights?

by Judith Blau

George Soros' article, "On Israel, America and AIPAC" serves as a sobering reminder that the human rights revolution is constantly being scuttled by geopolitics that not only sideline human rights, but more devastatingly undermine their premises. I happen to agree with him that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is a major obstacle to the U.S. normalizing relations with any country in the Middle East, including and especially Israel. AIPAC is something of a misnomer because it is a coalition, not a committee, and some of its key members include neo-cons, as Soros mentions, as well as Christian evangelicals. AIPAC has long been powerful in influencing American foreign policy with respect to Israel and the Middle East, but never as powerful as it is now with the Bush administration. From AIPAC's perspective, to criticize Israel is tantamount to being anti-Semitic, and for that reason Soros (who is Jewish, but not religious) is going out on a limb. In the end, I am not optimistic that Soros will be persuasive. But by focusing on the victims (or at least those in the Occupied Territories) I will propose another strategy that could be pursued, which simply bypasses entrenched allegiances, perhaps undermining them altogether.

Soros contrasts the failure of the Bush administration to facilitate a unity government between Hamas and Fatah with the efforts underway led by Saudi King Abdullah. Since Soros wrote his article, a unity government has been put into place, led by President Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah and Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas. Cabinet positions are split between Hamas and Fatah, with a few representatives of smaller parties. The 2006 economic boycott imposed on the Occupied Territories after the sweeping victory of Hamas remain in place in spite of the fact that the E.U. and the U.S. had earlier suggested a unity government would be acceptable. The E.U. and Soros' main point is that AIPAC has fundamentally stymied the U.S. from playing a useful and even sane role in facilitating a process that would lead to peace between Israel and the Palestinians, if not a two-state solution. Since it was published, the Soros piece has been both [praised](#) and [condemned](#) in subsequent exchanges in the pages of the *New York Review of Books*.

These exchanges follow on the heels of others set off about a year earlier in an article published in *The London Review of Books (LRB)* by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, entitled, "[The Israel Lobby](#)." The response to the article prompted the LRB to hold a debate under the heading "The Israel lobby: Does it have too much influence on American foreign policy?" The debate took place in New York on September 28 at Cooper Union. The panelists were Shlomo Ben-Ami, Martin Indyk, Tony Judt, Rashid Khalidi, John Mearsheimer and Dennis Ross, and the moderator was Anne-Marie Slaughter ([A videocast of the debate is available online](#)).

It is not as if these articles and live debates take place in a vacuum. Over the past year there has been an acrimonious fight between Alan Dershowitz and Norman Finkelstein involving similar issues (see [Frank Menetrez](#)'s April 30 th article in *Counterpunch* for a recent summary). And it is important to stress that there is a long history in which criticisms of Israel are interpreted as criticisms of Judaism. Hannah Arendt was accused of being an anti-Semite (see [Commentary Magazine](#)) in 1963 when she published *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

The truth of the matter is that Americans do not use the same standards for the state of Israel that they use for every other state, including their own, and since the 2003 invasion of Iraq this has been exacerbated. This has had devastating consequences for Palestinians. But in this regard the U.S. is not alone. In April 2006 the European Union and the U.S. both announced suspension of aid to the Palestinian Territories, with the E.U. announcing that it would only give [need based assistance](#), and the U.S. announcing that it would only provide aid that “[both protects and promotes democratic alternatives to Hamas](#)” (it should be noted that the 2004 election was considered by election observers to be democratic and fair).

What is truly tragic is revealed by [UNICEF's March 2007 Humanitarian Monitor for the Occupied Palestinian Territory](#). Regardless of what the U.S. State Department and the E.U. External Affairs Office believe, there is a humanitarian crisis unfolding. The details reported by UNICEF are tragic beyond comprehension:

- The Palestinian Authority can no longer pay salaries of health care workers;
- Immunization programs and most drug dispensing programs for chronic illnesses have ceased;
- There are no elective surgeries and outpatient clinics have closed;
- There is a ban on the importation of many drugs;
- In March 2007, homes, olive tree groves and buildings were destroyed;
- In March 2007 schools, including kindergartens, were destroyed;
- Consistent with warnings issued in 2004, the Beit Lahia wastewater treatment plant overflowed in March 2007, displacing more than 2,000 residents;
- In March 2007, over 67% of children between 9 and 12 months were malnourished;
- Food commodity imports declined appreciably in March 2007;
- 17 children under 18 were killed or injured in armed violence in March 2007;
- 384 children under 18 were held in detention by Israeli authorities in March 2007.

What can possibly be done? It might be assumed that *eventually* the U.S. and the E.U. would normalize relations with Israel, which in turn would mean more sensible thinking in the U.S. and the EU regarding the Occupied Territories. But in the meantime a “humanitarian crisis” is unfolding, according to a 2007 [United Nations](#) report. *Eventually* is too long to wait for residents of Gaza and the West Bank.

I would like to suggest an alternative, or supplementary strategy. Drawing from clear evidence of the determination and effectiveness of citizen-actors when they mobilize around human rights campaigns, a global citizens’ campaign would be effective against these harmful Israeli policies. As evidence of this, the international campaign and boycott played a critical role in the collapse of the South African apartheid regime, and there is now a boycott getting underway of companies that have operations in the Sudan. There have been effective boycotts of particular companies (e.g., Taco Bell, Nike, Starbucks, and Coca-Cola) and, also just getting underway, a boycott of Wal-Mart. As consumers have become more savvy about campaigns and mobilization, they have become more effective. For example, [United Students Against Sweatshops](#) (USAS) mobilized an increasingly successful campaign for “sweat-free campuses,” and now chapters of USAS have launched related campaigns, including those for a “Living Wage,” and “Workers’ Rights to Organize.” That is to say, students in the United States have become increasingly skillful in mobilizing around human rights, and in making connections involving different ethical issues.

We might imagine a campaign against multinationals headquartered in Israel, boycotts of products made or produced in Israel, and campaigns against companies located elsewhere that carry out substantial business with Israel. This may appear to be logistically complex, but waiting for heads of state to respond to the harms inflicted on Palestinians has taken far too long. Besides, the human rights revolution belongs to the people.

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*Judith Blau has published three books on human rights with Alberto Moncada: [Human Rights: Beyond the Liberal Vision](#) (2005); [Justice in the United States: Human Rights & the US Constitution](#) (2006); and, [Freedoms and Solidarities: In Pursuit of Human Rights](#) (2007). She is Director of the Social and Economic Justice (interdisciplinary) Undergraduate Minor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Blau and Moncada are now working on a volume on human rights that will be published by Paradigm. Outside of her academic work, Blau also serves as President of [Sociologists without Borders](#).*