

# Human Rights & Human Welfare

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Volume 7

Issue 5 *June Roundtable: An Annotation of "On Israel, America and AIPAC" by George Soros*

Article 3

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6-1-2007

## Should Supporters of Israel Embrace an "Open Society"?

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### Recommended Citation

Kreisler, Harry (2007) "Should Supporters of Israel Embrace an "Open Society"?", *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 7: Iss. 5, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol7/iss5/3>



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## Should Supporters of Israel Embrace an "Open Society"?

### Abstract

Organizations, such as lobbies, must adapt to changes in their environment or they risk mission failure and possible extinction. Adaptation requires new ideas, new constituencies, and rigorous self-analysis. A vigorous internal debate raises the possibility of corrections in course as an organization navigates through its changing environment.

### Keywords

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

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## Should Supporters of Israel Embrace an "Open Society"?

by Harry Kreisler

Organizations, such as lobbies, must adapt to changes in their environment or they risk mission failure and possible extinction. Adaptation requires new ideas, new constituencies, and rigorous self-analysis. A vigorous internal debate raises the possibility of corrections in course as an organization navigates through its changing environment.

In "On Israel, America, and AIPAC," financier George Soros has entered the debate on the role of American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in the making of U.S. policy toward Israel. He writes that "a much-needed self-examination of American policy in the Middle East has started in this country; but it can't make much headway as long as AIPAC retains powerful influence in both the Democratic and Republican parties."

Soros, a major funder of democratization abroad as well as of liberal candidates and research centers in the U.S., offers no new insight. Nonetheless, Soros's entry into the controversy about U.S. relations with Israel is significant, and reflects changes in the policy environment that shapes U.S.-Israeli relations. Internationally,

- Iran has emerged as a major regional player racing to acquire nuclear weapons;
- Divisions between Sunni and Shia have re-emerged with enormous implications for the Middle East; and
- U.S. intervention and its subsequent occupation of Iraq has turned into a foreign policy disaster.

Within the United States,

- There is a renewed debate about U.S. relations with Israel provoked by [two distinguished American academics](#): John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago and Steve Walt of Harvard University, and by a [former President](#) of the United States, Jimmy Carter;
- An [FBI sting operation](#) has netted two high AIPAC officials accused of passing top-secret data to Israel;
- The neo-conservative U.S. [foreign policy hegemony has collapsed](#). Although the Israeli foreign policy establishment was skeptical of the Iraq invasion, there is a strong identification of the American neo-con architects of the failed Iraq policy with uncritical support of Israel and involvement in Israeli politics.

In this environment, supporters of Israel must rethink their strategy. Should they direct their energies toward influencing Israel to change its policies on the Palestinian problem, including issues such as negotiation with Hamas? Should they caution Israel against labeling all adversaries as terrorists and thereby discouraging an Israeli strategy that might divide and conquer? Should supporters of Israel raise questions about the unintended consequences of having to police the Palestinian lands as an occupying power?

An internal debate about alternative options for Israel would position its American friends to support Israel while influencing a more mature American stance toward Israel. Unfortunately, supporters of Israel are frozen in time, apparently unwilling or unable to channel their concern

for Israel into support for more realistic policies within Israel, which would reflect the changed environment in the region and in the West. The friendly relations between two democratic states are not in question, but the direction and nature of the relationship is at stake.

Unfortunately, success in winning support for Israel has bred myopia. And this myopic faction in the United States gets its way and U.S. foreign policy does not adapt. The success is a consequence of understanding only part of Madison's insight in *The Federalist Papers*—a mobilized faction pursuing its interest is important in making policy. Over the years, the supporters of a strong, democratic Israel have made their voice heard. However, Madison also presumed a pluralism of interests balancing each other for the common good, a result generally found in U.S. domestic policy-making, but not in its foreign policy. There is no balancer of interests when a highly mobilized faction pursues its interests in this domain. If a uniformity of thought exists within the faction driving the policy, addressing change is even more difficult for both the faction (Israeli supporters) and the U.S. political system.

Since the founding of Israel in 1948, the Holocaust and the failure of Arab states to recognize Israel shaped the dialogue among supporters of Israel—and a diversity of opinion has been rare if non-existent in the Academy ([Ian Lustick is one glaring exception](#)). In this context of uniformity, AIPAC has assumed a pre-eminent role by taking advantage of the strategic logic that guided U.S. foreign policy.

In the first phase of U.S. relations with Israel (1948 to the end of the Cold War), Israel became a strategic partner and proxy for U.S. interests in the Middle East and elsewhere, but there was some balance because of America's need for oil and its subsequent support of the Arab states (especially Saudi Arabia). In this context, the vigorous, uncritical support of Israel by its supporters was sensible and was important in capturing the public's sense of Israel as the "David" facing the Arab "Goliath" whose goal was perceived to be a second Holocaust.

Little has evolved in thinking about Israel among its supporters even though the nature of Israeli's relation to its Arab neighbors changed with the 1967 war. See Tom Segev's new book, [1967: Israel, the War and the Year that Transformed the Middle East](#),

With the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the administration of George W. Bush, American policy toward Israel has become even more unbalanced. Christian evangelicals and prominent neo-cons became an important element overriding other concerns. Furthermore, important policy groups in Israel and in the United States embraced a one-dimensional notion of a global war on terrorism.

The threat to sound U.S. Middle East policy may not be the existence of the Israeli faction in the American debate; rather, the threat may lie in the failure of that faction to embrace alternative ideas in light of a changing environment. Ironically, Soros is known for [using his money](#) to shape the democratization of the Soviet bloc after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Perhaps some modest portion of these resources can now fund [a dialogue within the faction that supports Israel](#). An open society is the name of the game—a frank, vigorous debate about what is best for Israel and how American supporters of Israel can influence policymakers in Israel and the United States to insure Israel's survival and prosperity.

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*Conversations with History is also a critically acclaimed online archive containing more than 360 one-hour interviews with distinguished men and women from all over the world who talk about their lives and their work. Harry Kreisler is also Executive Producer of [Connecting Students to the World](#), a World Wide Web -based program that introduces students and retirees to leading figures in international affairs through online curricula, preparatory workshops, and Internet conversations.*