



## AIPAC Works for the 1 Percent

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By Chris Hedges

*Chris Hedges gave this talk Saturday night in Washington, D.C., at the [Occupy AIPAC](http://www.occupyaipac.org/) (<http://www.occupyaipac.org/>) protest, organized by [CODEPINK Women for Peace](http://www.codepink.org/) (<http://www.codepink.org/>) and other peace, faith and solidarity groups.*

The battle for justice in the Middle East is our battle. It is part of the vast, global battle against the 1 percent. It is about living rather than dying. It is about communicating rather than killing. It is about love rather than hate. It is part of the great battle against the corporate forces of death that reign over us—the fossil fuel industry, the weapons manufacturers, the security and surveillance state, the speculators on Wall Street, the oligarchic elites who assault our poor, our working men and women, our children, one in four of whom depend on food stamps to eat, the elites who are destroying our ecosystem with its trees, its air and its water and throwing into doubt our survival as a species.

What is being done in Gaza, the world's largest open-air prison, is a pale reflection of what is slowly happening to the rest of us. It is a window into the rise of the global security state, our new governing system that the political philosopher [Sheldon Wolin](http://press.princeton.edu/titles/8606.html) (<http://press.princeton.edu/titles/8606.html>) calls "inverted totalitarianism." It is a reflection of a world where the powerful are not bound by law, either on Wall Street or in the shattered remains of the countries we invade and occupy, including Iraq with its hundreds of thousands of dead. And one of the greatest purveyors of this demented ideology of violence for the sake of violence, this flagrant disregard for the rule of domestic and international law, is the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, or [AIPAC](http://action.aipac.org/welcome/6/) (<http://action.aipac.org/welcome/6/>).

I spent seven years in the Middle East. I was the Middle East bureau chief for The New York Times. I lived for two of those seven years in Jerusalem. AIPAC does not speak for Jews or for Israel. It is a mouthpiece for right-wing ideologues, some of whom hold power in Israel and some of whom hold power in Washington, who believe that because they have the capacity to wage war they have a right to wage war, whose loyalty, in the end, is not to the citizens of Israel or Palestine or the United States but the corporate elites, the defense contractors, those who make war a business, those who have turned ordinary Palestinians, Israelis and Americans, along with hundreds of millions of the world's poor, into commodities to exploit, repress and control.

We have not brought freedom, democracy and the virtues of Western civilization to the Muslim world. We have brought state terrorism, massive destruction, war and death. There is no moral distinction between a drone strike and the explosion of the improvised explosive device, between a suicide bombing and a targeted assassination. We have used the iron fist of the American military to implant our oil companies in Iraq, occupy Afghanistan and ensure that the Muslim world remains submissive and compliant. We have supported a government in Israel that has carried out egregious war crimes in Lebanon and Gaza and is daily stealing larger and larger portions of Palestinian land. We have established a network of military bases, some the size of small cities, in Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Kuwait, and we have secured basing rights in the Gulf states of Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates. We have expanded our military operations to Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Egypt, Algeria and Yemen. And no one believes, except perhaps us, that we have any intention of leaving.

And let us not forget that deep inside our secret world of offshore penal colonies, black sites, and torture and interrogation centers, we practice the cruelty and barbarity that always accompanies unchecked imperial power. There were scores of graphic pictures and videos from the prison in Abu Ghraib that were swiftly classified and hidden from public view. And in these videos, as [Seymour Hersh](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/seymour_m_hersh/search?contributorName=seymour%20m%20hersh) ([http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/seymour\\_m\\_hersh/search?contributorName=seymour%20m%20hersh](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/seymour_m_hersh/search?contributorName=seymour%20m%20hersh)) reported, mothers who were arrested with their young sons, often children, watched in horror as their boys were repeatedly sodomized. This was filmed. And on the soundtrack you hear the boys shrieking. And the mothers were smuggling notes out to their families saying, "Come and kill us because of what is happening."

We are the biggest problem in the Middle East. It is we who legitimize the Mahmoud Ahmadinejads, suicide bombers and radical jihadists. The longer we drop iron fragmentation bombs and seize Muslim land, the longer we kill with impunity, the more these monsters, reflections of our own distorted image, will proliferate.

"If you gaze into the abyss," Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "the abyss gazes into you."

I am no friend of the Iranian regime, which helped create and arm Hezbollah, is certainly meddling in Iraq, has persecuted human rights activists, gays, women and religious and ethnic minorities, embraces racism and intolerance, and uses its power to deny popular will. And yes, it is a regime that appears determined to build a nuclear weapon, although I would stress that no one has offered any proof this is occurring. I have spent time in Iranian jails. I was once deported from Tehran in handcuffs. But I do not remember Iran orchestrating a coup in the United States to [replace an elected government](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1953_Iranian_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat) ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1953\\_Iranian\\_coup\\_d%27%C3%A9tat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1953_Iranian_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat)) with a brutal dictator who for decades persecuted, assassinated and imprisoned democracy activists. I do not remember Iran [arming and funding](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_support_for_Iraq_during_the_Iran%E2%80%93Iraq_war) ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_States\\_support\\_for\\_Iraq\\_during\\_the\\_Iran%E2%80%93Iraq\\_war](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_support_for_Iraq_during_the_Iran%E2%80%93Iraq_war)) a neighboring state to wage war against our country. Iran never shot down one of our passenger jets, as did the USS Vincennes—nicknamed Robocruiser by the crews of other American vessels—when in June 1988 it fired missiles at an Airbus filled with Iranian civilians, killing everyone on board. Iran is not sponsoring terrorist strikes within the United States, as our intelligence services and the Israeli intelligence services currently do in Iran. We have not seen five of our top nuclear scientists since 2007 murdered on American soil. The attacks in Iran include suicide bombings, kidnappings, beheadings, sabotage and "targeted assassinations" of government officials and other Iranian leaders. What would we do if the situation were reversed? How would we react if Iran carried out similar acts of terrorism against us?

We are, and have long been, the primary engine for radicalism in the Middle East. The greatest favor we can do for democracy activists in Iran, as

well as in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Gulf and the states that dot North Africa, is to withdraw our troops from the region and begin to speak to Iranians and the rest of the Muslim world in the civilized language of diplomacy, respect and mutual interests. The longer we cling to the doomed doctrine of permanent war the more we give credibility to the extremists who need, indeed yearn for, an enemy that speaks in the same crude slogans of nationalist cant and violence that they do. The louder the Israelis and their idiot allies in Washington call for the bombing of Iran to thwart its nuclear ambitions, the happier are the morally bankrupt clerics who are ordering the beating and murder of demonstrators. We may laugh when crowds supporting [President] Ahmadinejad call us “the Great Satan,” but there is a very palpable reality that informs the terrible algebra of their hatred. And since even the most optimistic scenarios say that any strike on Iranian nuclear installations will at best set back Iran’s alleged weapons program by [only] three or four years, we can be sure that violence will beget violence, just as fanaticism begets fanaticism.

The hypocrisy of this vaunted moral crusade is not lost on those in the Middle East. Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Pakistan, India and Israel did not and developed nuclear weapons programs in secret. Israel now has an estimated 400 to 600 nuclear weapons. The word “Dimona,” the name of the city where the nuclear facilities are located in Israel, is shorthand in the Muslim world for the deadly Israeli threat to Muslims’ existence.

What lessons did the Iranians learn from our Israeli, Pakistani and Indian allies?

Given that we are actively engaged in an effort to destabilize the Iranian regime, given that we use apocalyptic rhetoric to describe what must be done to the Iranian regime, and given that Israel could obliterate Iran many times over, what do we expect from the Iranians? On top of this, the Iranian regime grasps that the doctrine of permanent war entails making “pre-emptive” and unprovoked strikes. And they know that if Iraq, like North Korea, had had a bomb they would have never suffered American invasion and occupation.

Those in Washington who advocate attacking Iran, knowing as little about the limitations and chaos of war as they do about the Middle East, believe they can cripple nuclear production and neutralize the 850,000-man Iranian army. They should look closely at the 2006 Israeli air campaign in southern Lebanon, which saw Hezbollah victorious and united most Lebanese behind the militant Islamic group. If the massive Israeli bombing of Lebanon failed to pacify 4 million Lebanese, how can we expect to pacify a country of 70 million people? But reality never seems to impinge on the neoconservative universe or the efficacy of its doctrine of permanent war.

I have watched over the years as these neoconservatives have meddled disastrously in the Middle East. The support by neoconservatives of the Israeli right wing—and I covered Yitzhak Rabin’s 1992 campaign for prime minister when prominent AIPAC donors poured money and resources into Likud to defeat Rabin—is not about Israel. It is about advancing this perverted ideology. Rabin detested these neoconservatives. When he made his first visit to Washington after being elected prime minister he dismissed requests from the lobby for a meeting by telling aides: “I don’t speak to scumbags.”

These neoconservatives, who like our own neoconservatives hide behind the rhetoric of patriotism, national security and religious piety, are not wedded to any discernable doctrine other than force. They, like all rabid nationalists, are stunted and deformed individuals, only able to communicate in the language of self-exaltation and violence.

“The nationalist is by definition an ignoramus,” the Yugoslav writer [Danilo Kiš](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danilo_Ki%C5%A1) ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danilo\\_Ki%C5%A1](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danilo_Ki%C5%A1)) wrote. “Nationalism is the line of least resistance, the easy way. The nationalist is untroubled, he knows or thinks he knows what his values are, his, that’s to say national, that’s to say the values of the nation he belongs to, ethical and political; he is not interested in others, *they are no concern of his*, hell—it’s other people (other nations, another tribe). They don’t even need investigating. The nationalist sees other people in his own images—as nationalists.”

AIPAC does not drive Middle Eastern policy in the United States. I am afraid it is worse than that. AIPAC is one of an array of powerful and well-funded neoconservative institutions that worship force and drive our relations with the rest of the world. These neoconservatives choose an enemy and then our compliant class of journalists, specialists, military analysts, columnists and television commentators line up to serve as giddy cheerleaders for war. Moments like these always make me embarrassed to be a reporter. Our political elite, Republican and Democrat, finds in this ideology a simple, childish allure. This ideology does not require cultural, historical or linguistic literacy. It reduces the world to black and white, good and evil. The drumbeat for war with Iran sounded by AIPAC is part of this broad, sick, binary vision of a world that can be subjugated by force, a world where all will be made to kneel before these corporate and neoconservative elites, where none, including finally us, will be permitted to whisper dissent.

Pre-emptive war, under post-Nuremberg law, is defined as a criminal act of aggression. George W. Bush, whose disregard for the rule of law was legend, went to the U.N. for a resolution to attack Iraq, although his interpretation of the U.N. resolution as justifying the invasion of Iraq had dubious legal merit. But in this current debate over war with Iran, that pretense of legality is ignored. Where is Israel’s U.N. resolution authorizing it to strike Iran? Why isn’t anyone demanding that Israel seek one? Why does the only discussion in the media and among political elites center around the questions of “Will Israel attack Iran?” “Can it successfully carry out an attack?” “What will happen if there is an attack?” The essential question is left unasked. Does Israel have the right to attack Iran? And here the answer is very, very clear. It does not.

These neoconservatives were too blind and too enamored of their own power to see what invading Afghanistan and Iraq would trigger; so too are they unable to comprehend the regional conflagration that would be unleashed by attacking Iran, what it would mean for us, for Israel, for our allies and for tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of innocents.

“Where there is no vision, the people perish,” the Bible warns.

And since our elites have no vision it is up to us. The uprisings from Tunisia to Egypt to Greece to Occupy Wall Street to our gathering outside AIPAC’s doors in Washington are the same primal struggle for sanity, peace and justice, for a world wrenched free from the grip of those who would destroy it. And the abject fawning of our political elite, including Barack Obama, before AIPAC and its bank account is yet another window into the moral bankruptcy of our political class, another sign that the formal mechanisms of power are useless and broken. Civil disobedience is all we have left. It is our patriotic duty. We are called to make the cries of mothers, fathers and children in the squalid refugee camps in Gaza, in the suburbs of Tehran and in the bleak industrial wastelands in Ohio heard. We are called to stand up before these forces of death, the purveyors of violence, those whose hearts have grown cold with hatred. We are called to embrace and defend life with intensity and passion if we are to survive as a species, if we are to save our planet from the ravages of corporate greed and the specter of endless and futile war.

The Israeli poet [Aharon Shabtai](http://www.poetryinternational.org/piw/cms/cms/cms_module/index.php?obj_id=3158) ([http://www.poetryinternational.org/piw/cms/cms/cms\\_module/index.php?obj\\_id=3158](http://www.poetryinternational.org/piw/cms/cms/cms_module/index.php?obj_id=3158)), in his poem “Rypin,” translated by Peter Cole, examined what power, force and self-worship do to compassion, justice and human decency. Rypin was the Polish town his father escaped from during the pogroms.

These creatures in helmets and khakis,  
I say to myself, aren't Jews,  
In the truest sense of the word. A Jew  
Doesn't dress himself up with weapons like jewelry,  
Doesn't believe in the barrel of a gun aimed at a target,  
But in the thumb of the child who was shot at—  
In the house through which he comes and goes,  
Not in the charge that blows it apart.  
The coarse soul and iron fist  
He scorns by nature.  
He lifts his eyes not to the officer, or the soldier  
With his finger on the trigger—but to justice,  
And he cries out for compassion.  
Therefore, he won't steal land from its people  
And will not starve them in camps.  
The voice calling for expulsion  
Is heard from the hoarse throat of the oppressor—  
A sure sign that the Jew has entered a foreign country  
And, like [Umberto Saba](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umberto_Saba) ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umberto\\_Saba](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umberto_Saba)), gone into hiding within his own city.  
Because of voices like these, father  
At age sixteen, with your family, you fled Rypin;  
Now here Rypin is your son.



Illustration by Mr. Fish

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