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Back in the USA

Noam Chomsky

May 2002

A year ago, Hebrew University sociologist Baruch Kimmerling observed that “What we feared has come true.” Jews and Palestinians are “regressing to superstitious tribalism... War appears an unavoidable fate,” an “evil colonial” war. After Israel’s invasion of the refugee camps this year his colleague Ze’ev Sternhell wrote that “In colonial Israel...human life is cheap.” The leadership is “no longer ashamed to speak of war when what they are really engaged in is colonial policing, which recalls the takeover by the white police of the poor neighborhoods of the blacks in South Africa during the apartheid era.” Both stress the obvious: there is no symmetry between the “ethno-national groups” regressing to tribalism. The conflict is centered in territories that have been under harsh military occupation for 35 years. The conqueror is a major military power, acting with massive military, economic and diplomatic support from the global superpower. Its subjects are alone and defenseless, many barely surviving in miserable camps, currently suffering even more brutal terror of a kind familiar in “evil colonial wars” and now carrying out terrible atrocities of their own in revenge.

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Retrieved on 2nd July 2021 from chomsky.info
Published in *Red Pepper*.

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The Oslo “peace process” changed the modalities of the occupation, but not the basic concept. Shortly before joining the Ehud Barak government, historian Shlomo Ben-Ami wrote that “the Oslo agreements were founded on a neo-colonialist basis, on a life of dependence of one on the other forever.” He soon became an architect of the US-Israel proposals at Camp David in Summer 2000, which kept to this condition. These were highly praised in US commentary. The Palestinians and their evil leader were blamed for their failure and the subsequent violence. But that is outright “fraud,” as Kimmerling reported, along with all other serious commentators.

True, Clinton-Barak advanced a few steps towards a Bantustan-style settlement. Just prior to Camp David, West Bank Palestinians were confined to over 200 scattered areas, and Clinton-Barak did propose an improvement: consolidation to three cantons, under Israeli control, virtually separated from one another and from the fourth enclave, a small area of East Jerusalem, the center of Palestinian life and of communications in the region. In the fifth canton, Gaza, the outcome was left unclear except that the population were also to remain virtually imprisoned. It is understandable that maps are not to be found in the US mainstream, or any of the details of the proposals.

No one can seriously doubt that the US role will continue to be decisive. It is therefore of crucial importance to understand what that role has been, and how it is internally perceived. The version of the doves is presented by the editors of the NY Times (7 April), praising the President’s “path-breaking speech” and the “emerging vision” he articulated. Its first element is “ending Palestinian terrorism,” immediately. Some time later comes “freezing, then rolling back, Jewish settlements and negotiating new borders” to end the occupation and allow the establishment of a Palestinian state. If Palestinian terror ends, Israelis will be encouraged to “take the Arab League’s historic offer of full peace and recognition in exchange for an Israeli

withdrawal more seriously.” But first Palestinian leaders must demonstrate that they are “legitimate diplomatic partners.”

The real world has little resemblance to this self-serving portrayal — virtually copied from the 1980s, when the US and Israel were desperately seeking to evade PLO offers of negotiation and political settlement while keeping to the demand that there will be no negotiations with the PLO, no “additional Palestinian state...” (Jordan already being a Palestinian state), and “no change in the status of Judea, Samaria and Gaza other than in accordance with the basic guidelines of the [Israeli] Government” (the May 1989 Peres-Shamir coalition plan, endorsed by Bush I in the Baker plan of Dec. 1989). All of this remained unpublished in the US mainstream, as regularly before, while commentary denounced the Palestinians for their single-minded commitment to terror, undermining the humanistic endeavors of the US and its allies.

In the real world, the primary barrier to the “emerging vision” has been, and remains, unilateral US rejectionism. There is little new in the “Arab League’s historic offer.” It repeats the basic terms of a Security Council Resolution of January 1976 backed by virtually the entire world, including the leading Arab states, the PLO, Europe, the Soviet bloc — in fact, everyone who mattered. It was opposed by Israel and vetoed by the US, thereby vetoing it from history. The Resolution called for a political settlement on the internationally-recognized borders “with appropriate arrangements...to guarantee...the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence of all states in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized borders” — in effect, a modification of UN 242 (as officially interpreted by the US as well), amplified to include a Palestinian state. Similar initiatives from the Arab states, the PLO, and Europe have since been blocked by the US and mostly suppressed or denied in public commentary.

US rejectionism goes back 5 years earlier, to February 1971, when President Sadat of Egypt offered Israel a full peace treaty

in return for Israeli withdrawal from Egyptian territory, with no mention of Palestinian national rights or the fate of the other occupied territories. Israel's Labor government recognized this to be a genuine peace offer, but rejected it, intending to extend its settlements to northeastern Sinai; that it soon did, with extreme brutality, the immediate cause for the 1973 war. Israel and the US understood that peace was possible in accord with official US policy. But as Labor Party leader Ezer Weizmann (later President) explained, that outcome would not allow Israel to "exist according to the scale, spirit, and quality she now embodies." Israeli commentator Amos Elon wrote that Sadat caused "panic" among the Israeli political leadership when he announced his willingness "to enter into a peace agreement with Israel, and to respect its independence and sovereignty in 'secure and recognized borders'."

Kissinger succeeded in blocking peace, instituting his preference for what he called "stalemate": no negotiations, only force. Jordanian peace offers were also dismissed. Since that time, official US policy has kept to the international consensus on withdrawal — until Clinton, who effectively rescinded UN resolutions and considerations of international law. But in practice, policy has followed the Kissinger guidelines, accepting negotiations only when compelled to do so, as Kissinger was after the near-debacle of the 1973 war for which he shares major responsibility, and under the conditions that Ben-Ami articulated.

Plans for Palestinians followed the guidelines formulated by Moshe Dayan, one of the Labor leaders more sympathetic to the Palestinian plight. He advised the Cabinet that Israel should make it clear to refugees that "we have no solution, you shall continue to live like dogs, and whoever wishes may leave, and we will see where this process leads." When challenged, he responded by citing Ben-Gurion, who "said that whoever approaches the Zionist problem from a moral aspect is not a Zionist." He could have also cited Chaim Weizmann, who held that

power” (affirmed, for example, by George Bush I when he was UN Ambassador). In October 2000 the Security Council reaffirmed the consensus on this matter, “call[ing] on Israel, the occupying power, to abide scrupulously by its legal obligations under the Fourth Geneva Convention.” The vote was 14–0. Clinton abstained, presumably not wanting to veto one of the core principles of international humanitarian law, particularly in light of the circumstances in which it was enacted: to criminalize formally the atrocities of the Nazis. All of this too was consigned quickly to the memory hole, another contribution to “enhancing terror.”

Until such matters are permitted to enter discussion, and their implications understood, it is meaningless to call for “US engagement in the peace process,” and prospects for constructive action will remain grim.

the fate of the “several hundred thousand negroes” in the Jewish homeland “is a matter of no consequence.”

Not surprisingly, the guiding principle of the occupation has been incessant and degrading humiliation, along with torture, terror, destruction of property, displacement and settlement, and takeover of basic resources, crucially water. That has, of course, required decisive US support, extending through the Clinton-Barak years. “The Barak government is leaving Sharon’s government a surprising legacy,” the Israeli press reported as the transition took place: “the highest number of housing starts in the territories since the time when Ariel Sharon was Minister of Construction and Settlement in 1992 before the Oslo agreements” — funding provided by the American taxpayer, deceived by fanciful tales of the “visions” and “magnanimity” of US leaders, foiled by terrorists like Arafat who have forfeited “our trust,” perhaps also by some Israeli extremists who are overreacting to their crimes.

How Arafat must act to regain our trust is explained succinctly by Edward Walker, the State Department official responsible for the region under Clinton. The devious Arafat must announce without ambiguity that “We put our future and fate in the hands of the US,” which has led the campaign to undermine Palestinian rights for 30 years.

More serious commentary recognized that the “historic offer” largely reiterated the Saudi Fahd Plan of 1981 — undermined, it was regularly claimed, by Arab refusal to accept the existence of Israel. The facts are again quite different. The 1981 plan was undermined by an Israeli reaction that even its mainstream press condemned as “hysterical.” Shimon Peres warned that the Fahd plan “threatened Israel’s very existence.” President Haim Herzog charged that the “real author” of the Fahd plan was the PLO, and that it was even more extreme than the January 1976 Security Council resolution that was “prepared by” the PLO when he was Israel’s UN Ambassador. These claims can hardly be true (though the PLO publicly backed both

plans), but they are an indication of the desperate fear of a political settlement on the part of Israeli doves, with the unremitting and decisive support of the US.

The basic problem then, as now, traces back to Washington, which has persistently backed Israel's rejection of a political settlement in terms of the broad international consensus, reiterated in essentials in "the Arab League's historic offer."

Current modifications of US rejectionism are tactical and so far minor. With plans for an attack on Iraq endangered, the US permitted a UN resolution calling for Israeli withdrawal from the newly-invaded territories "without delay" — meaning "as soon as possible," Secretary of State Colin Powell explained at once. Palestinian terror is to end "immediately," but far more extreme Israeli terror, going back 35 years, can take its time. Israel at once escalated its attack, leading Powell to say "I'm pleased to hear that the prime minister says he is expediting his operations." There is much suspicion that Powell's arrival in Israel is being delayed so that they can be "expedited" further. That US stance may well change, again for tactical reasons.

The US also allowed a UN Resolution calling for a "vision" of a Palestinian state. This forthcoming gesture, which received much acclaim, does not rise to the level of South Africa 40 years ago when the Apartheid regime actually implemented its "vision" of Black-run states that were at least as viable and legitimate as the neo-colonial dependency that the US and Israel have been planning for the occupied territories.

Meanwhile the US continues to "enhance terror," to borrow the President's words, by providing Israel with the means for terror and destruction, including a new shipment of the most advanced helicopters in the US arsenal (Robert Fisk, *Independent*, 7 April). These are standard reactions to atrocities by a client regime. To cite one instructive example, in the first days of the current Intifada, Israel used US helicopters to attack civilian targets, killing 10 Palestinians and wounding 35, hardly in "self-defense." Clinton responded with an agreement for "the

largest purchase of military helicopters by the Israeli Air Force in a decade" (*Ha'aretz*, 3 October, '01), along with spare parts for Apache attack helicopters. The press helped out by refusing to report the facts. A few weeks later, Israel began to use US helicopters for assassinations as well. One of the first acts of the Bush administration was to send Apache Longbow helicopters, the most murderous available. That received some marginal notice under business news.

Washington's commitment to "enhancing terror" was illustrated again in December, when it vetoed a Security Council Resolution calling for implementation of the Mitchell Plan and dispatch of international monitors to oversee reduction of violence, the most effective means as generally recognized, opposed by Israel and regularly blocked by Washington. The veto took place during a 21-day period of calm — meaning that only one Israeli soldier was killed, along with 21 Palestinians including 11 children, and 16 Israeli incursions into areas under Palestinian control (Graham Usher, *Middle East International*, 25 January '02). Ten days before the veto, the US boycotted — thus undermined — an international conference in Geneva that once again concluded that the Fourth Geneva Convention applies to the occupied territories, so that virtually everything the US and Israel do there is a "grave breach"; a "war crime" in simple terms. The conference specifically declared the US-funded Israeli settlements to be illegal, and condemned the practice of "wilful killing, torture, unlawful deportation, wilful depriving of the rights of fair and regular trial, extensive destruction and appropriation of property...carried out unlawfully and wantonly." As a High Contracting Party, the US is obligated by solemn treaty to prosecute those responsible for such crimes, including its own leadership. Accordingly, all of this passes in silence.

The US has not officially withdrawn its recognition of the applicability of the Geneva Conventions to the occupied territories, or its censure of Israeli violations as the "occupying