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Israel, Lebanon, and the “Peace Process”

Noam Chomsky

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Lebanon has been a victim of the Arab-Israel conflict for half a century. In 1948, and again in 1967, it was a dumping ground for Palestinians who fled or were expelled by the Israeli army. Their right to return or compensation is written into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Dec. 10, 1948), spelled out more explicitly in UN Resolution 194 passed unanimously the next day, and reiterated annually.

That right, of course, is conditional on U.S. decisions. Since World War II, the U.S. has controlled the region, recognizing it to be “a stupendous source of strategic power, and one of the greatest material prizes in world history.” Washington’s support of the right of return was rhetorical only, and has been officially abandoned by the Clinton Administration. By U.S. decision, then, the refugees are a problem for Lebanon and Jordan, and do not have the rights accorded them by the community of nations.

After the 1967 Israel-Arab war, a diplomatic framework was established calling for peace along with Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories, with at most minor and mutual adjustment

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(UN 242, reiterated in official U.S. policy statements). The Arab states refused peace and Israel refused withdrawal, proposing instead the “Allon Plan,” which left it in control of much of the territories. The impasse was broken in 1971, when President Sadat of Egypt agreed to full peace in return for Israeli withdrawal from Egyptian territory. U.S. policy then shifted to support for Israel’s stand, under Kissinger’s formula of “stalemate.”

International isolation increased in the mid-1970s, when virtually the entire world endorsed a modification of UN 242 to include a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. Washington was compelled to veto a Security Council resolution to this effect in January 1976, to vote regularly against subsequent UN resolutions, and to block other diplomatic initiatives from Europe, the Arab states, the PLO, and others.

From the early 1970s, Lebanon was drawn into the conflict as a result of cross-border PLO terror and far more destructive Israeli attacks on Lebanon, sometimes retaliatory, often not. Thus in February 1973, Israeli forces attacked north of Beirut, killing many civilians, in a raid justified as preemptive. In December 1975, Israeli bombing killed over 50 Lebanese in an attack Israel described as “preventive, not punitive”; it appears to have been a reaction to the UN Security Council meeting debating the diplomatic settlement that Israel opposed and Washington vetoed. There are many other examples.

The Camp David agreements in 1978–79 neutralized Egypt, leaving Israel “free to sustain military operations against the PLO in Lebanon as well as settlement activity on the West Bank” (Israeli strategic analyst Avner Yaniv). As Yaniv and other Israeli commentators have observed, Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon, after a year of Israeli attacks that failed to elicit PLO retaliation, was motivated by concern that the PLO’s public advocacy of the international consensus might undermine U.S.-Israeli rejectionism. The invasion eliminated the problem of PLO moderation by demolishing the organization in Lebanon, but created a new problem: the formation of

the Islamic fundamentalist group Hizbollah, with the official aim of driving Israel from Lebanon. Despite massive resort to terror, Israel was forced to withdraw from all but the southern part of Lebanon, where it maintains a “security zone” in violation of orders of the UN Security Council issued in March 1978.

The Iraq war in 1991 put the U.S. in a position to implement its own unilateral settlement, ratified in the Oslo Agreements. The latest phase, Oslo II, grants Israel control of far more of the territories than it demanded in the Allon Plan, and affirms its legal rights throughout the territories, thus rescinding UN 242 and other relevant UN Resolutions and official declarations. A greatly expanded Jerusalem region is effectively incorporated within Israel, which also keeps control of most of West Bank water resources. Settlement and construction programs implementing these plans were extended, relying on U.S. subsidies. During the first three years of the Rabin-Peres Labor government, to July 1995, the number of settlers increased by 30% (not counting Greater Jerusalem). Government expenditures and inducements for new settlers continue after Oslo II. The intended goal, it appears, is to ensure Israel’s control of the territories, with scattered cantons of local Palestinian administration. If these are called a “Palestinian state,” the result will resemble South Africa’s Bantustan policy, but not quite. The Bantustans were subsidized by South Africa, while the U.S.-Israeli plan is to leave to the Palestinian cantons the task of dealing with the bitter effects of the military occupation, which barred any possibility of economic development.

Meanwhile Israeli attacks on Lebanon continued, killing many civilians. In 1993, these attacks elicited retaliation by Hizbollah, to which Israel responded by invading Lebanon. An agreement was reached to restrict military actions by either side to Israel’s “security zone” in Lebanon. Israel has ignored the agreement, attacking elsewhere at will. Thus, the day that Prime Minister Shimon Peres took office after the Rabin assassination in November 1995, the New York Times reported approvingly that Israeli warplanes

attacked targets near Beirut, thus demonstrating that Peres would maintain Rabin's hard line. So matters continued, occasionally receiving brief notice, as on March 21 1996, when Israel attacked Muslim villages north of the "security zone" in retaliation for attacks on its occupying army. The standard story in U.S. commentary is that "the accord had largely held until [April 1996], when Hezbollah resumed its attacks" (New York Times). The slightest attention to facts suffices to refute the doctrine, which nevertheless reigns unchallenged.

The Israeli offensive of April 1996, much like those of earlier years, has the openly expressed intent of punishing the civilian population so that the government of Lebanon will be compelled to accept U.S. – Israeli demands. It is this "rational prospect" that has always motivated Israel's attacks on civilian populations, Israeli diplomat Abba Eban explained years ago.

The short-term goal today, Washington announced, is to modify the 1993 agreement to require that all actions against the Israeli occupying forces cease, and that Hizbollah disarm; Lebanon rejected the proposal, insisting on the right of resistance to foreign occupation that was endorsed by the UN in 1987 by a vote of 153–2 (U.S. and Israel opposed, Honduras alone abstaining), still unreported in the U.S. Washington's long-term goal is to integrate Lebanon and Syria into the Middle East system based on U.S. client states. Palestinians in the occupied territories are to be reduced to a minor annoyance, with local administration under general Israeli control. The refugees are to be forgotten.

It is well to remember that Israel's actions, however one assesses them, are conducted with virtual impunity. As Washington's leading client state, Israel inherits the right to do as it chooses. A dramatic illustration of this right, quite relevant to Lebanon, has just been offered in the home country. On April 19, there was much anguished commentary on the car bombing at Oklahoma City a year earlier, when middle America "looked like Beirut," headlines lamented.

Beirut, of course, had looked like Beirut long before; for example, just 10 years before, when the worst terrorist act of the period was perpetrated in Beirut, a car bombing timed to cause maximum civilian casualties, virtually duplicated at Oklahoma City. The facts are well known, but unmentionable. That act of terror was carried out by the CIA, a fact that suffices to remove the incident from history along with much else that suffers the same defect. The implications are of no slight significance in world affairs.