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Neocolonial Invitation to a Tribal War

Noam Chomsky

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“What we feared has come true,” Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling writes in Israel’s leading newspaper. Jews and Palestinians are “regressing to superstitious tribalism.... War appears an unavoidable fate,” an “evil colonial” war. This prospect is likely if the U.S. grants tacit authorization, with grim consequences that may reverberate far beyond.

There is, of course, no symmetry between the “ethno-national groups” regressing to tribalism. The conflict is centered in territories that have been under harsh military occupation since 1967. The conqueror is a major armed 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.

The cruelty of the occupation has been sharply condemned by international and Israeli human rights groups for many years. The purpose of the terror, economic strangulation and daily humiliation is not obscure. It was articulated in the early years of the occupation by Moshe Dayan, one of the Israeli leaders most sympathetic

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to the Palestinian plight, who advised his Labor Party associates to tell the Palestinians that “you shall continue to live like dogs, and whoever wishes may leave.”

The Oslo “peace process” changed the modalities, but not the basic concept. Shortly before joining the Ehud Barak government, historian Shlomo Ben-Ami, a dove in the U.S.-Israeli spectrum, wrote that “the Oslo agreements were founded on a neocolonialist basis.” The intent was to impose on the Palestinians “almost total dependence on Israel” in a “colonial situation” that was to be “permanent.” He soon became the architect of the latest Barak government proposals, virtually identical to Bill Clinton’s final plan.

These proposals were highly praised in U.S. commentary; the Palestinians and Yasser Arafat were blamed for their failure and the subsequent violence.

That presentation “was a fraud perpetrated on Israeli ... and international ... public opinion,” Kimmerling writes accurately. He continues that, a look at a map suffices to show that the Clinton-Barak plans “presented to the Palestinians impossible terms.” Crucially, Israel retained “two settlement blocs that in effect cut the West Bank into pieces.” The Palestinian enclaves also are effectively separated from the center of Palestinian life in Jerusalem; the Gaza Strip remains isolated, its population virtually imprisoned.

Israeli settlement in the territories doubled during the years of the “peace process,” increasing under Barak, who bequeathed the new government of Ariel Sharon “a surprising legacy,” the Israeli press reported as the transition took place early this year: “The highest number of housing starts in the territories” since the time when Sharon supervised settlements in 1992, before Oslo. The facts on the ground are the living reality for the desperate population.

The nature of permanent neo-colonial dependency was underscored by Israel’s High Court of Justice in November 1999 when it rejected yet another Palestinian petition opposing further expansion of the [Jewish] city of Maale Adumim established to the east of Jerusalem, virtually partitioning the West Bank.

The court suggested that “some good for the residents of neighboring [Palestinian villages] might spring from the economic and cultural development” of the all-Jewish city. While they try to survive without water to drink or fields to cultivate, the people whose lands have been taken can enjoy the sight of the ample housing, green lawns, swimming pools and other amenities of the heavily subsidized Israeli settlements.

Immediately after World War II, the Geneva Conventions were adopted to bar repetition of Nazi crimes, including transfer of population to occupied territories or actions that harm civilians. As a so-called high contracting party, the U.S. is obligated “to ensure respect” for the conventions.

With Israel alone opposed, the United Nations has repeatedly declared the conventions applicable to the occupied territories; the U.S. abstains from these votes, unwilling to take a public stand in violation of fundamental principles of international law, which require it to act to prevent settlement and expropriation, attacks on civilians with U.S.-supplied helicopters, collective punishment and all other repressive measures used by the occupying forces. Washington has continued to provide the means to implement these practices, refusing even to allow observers who might reduce violence and protect the victims.

For 25 years, there has been a near-unanimous international consensus on the terms of political settlement: a full peace treaty with establishment of a Palestinian state after Israeli withdrawal, an outcome that enjoys wide support even within Israel. It has been blocked by Washington ever since its veto of a Security Council resolution to that effect in 1976.

It is far from an ideal solution. But the likely current alternatives are far more ugly.