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On the US-Israeli Invasion of Lebanon

Noam Chomsky

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Though there are many interacting factors, the immediate issue that lies behind the latest US-Israeli invasion of Lebanon remains, I believe, what it was in the four preceding invasions: the Israel-Palestine conflict. In the most important case, the devastating US-backed 1982 Israeli invasion was openly described in Israel as a war for the West Bank, undertaken to put an end to annoying PLO calls for a diplomatic settlement (with the secondary goal of imposing a client regime in Lebanon). There are numerous other illustrations. Despite the many differences in circumstances, the July 2006 invasion falls generally into the same pattern.

Among mainstream American critics of Bush administration policies, the favored version is that “We had always approached [conflict between Israel and its neighbors] in a balanced way, assuming that we could be the catalyst for an agreement,” but Bush II regrettably abandoned that neutral stance, causing great problems for the United States (Middle East specialist and former diplomat Edward Walker, a leading moderate). The actual record is quite different: For over 30 years, Washington has unilaterally

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barred a peaceful political settlement, with only slight and brief deviations.

The consistent rejectionism can be traced back to the February 1971 Egyptian offer of a full peace treaty with Israel, in the terms of official US policy, offering nothing for the Palestinians. Israel understood that this peace offer would put an end to any security threat, but the government decided to reject security in favor of expansion, then mostly into northeastern Sinai. Washington supported Israel's stand, adhering to Kissinger's principle of "stale-mate": force, not diplomacy. It was only 8 years later, after a terrible war and great suffering, that Washington agreed to Egypt's demand for withdrawal from its territory.

Meanwhile the Palestinian issue had entered the international agenda, and a broad international consensus had crystallized in favor of a two-state settlement on the pre-June 1967 border, perhaps with minor and mutual adjustments. In December 1975, the UN Security Council agreed to consider a resolution proposed by the Arab "confrontation states" with these provisions, also incorporating the basic wording of UN 242. The US vetoed the resolution. Israel's reaction was to bomb Lebanon, killing over 50 people in Nabatiye, calling the attack "preventive" – presumably to "prevent" the UN session, which Israel boycotted.

The only significant exception to consistent US-Israeli rejectionism was in January 2001, when Israeli and Palestinian negotiators came close to agreement in Taba. But the negotiations were called off by Israeli Prime Minister Barak four days early, ending that promising effort. Unofficial but high-level negotiations continued, leading to the Geneva Accord of December 2002, with similar proposals. It was welcomed by most of the world, but rejected by Israel and dismissed by Washington (and, reflexively, the US media and intellectual classes).

Meanwhile US-backed Israeli settlement and infrastructure programs have been "creating facts on the ground" in order to undermine potential realization of Palestinian national rights.

mar brothers, one day before, on June 24. They disappeared into Israel's prison system, joining the hundreds of others imprisoned without charge – hence kidnapped, as are many of those sentenced on dubious charges. There was some brief and dismissive mention of the kidnapping of the Muamar brothers, but no reaction, because such crimes are considered legitimate when carried out by “our side.” The idea that this crime would justify a murderous assault on Israel would have been regarded as a reversion to Nazism.

The distinction is clear, and familiar throughout history: to paraphrase Thucydides, the powerful are entitled to do as they wish, while the weak suffer as they must.

We should not overlook the progress that has been made in undermining the imperial mentality that is so deeply rooted in Western moral and intellectual culture as to be beyond awareness. Nor should we forget the scale of what remains to be achieved, tasks that must be undertaken in solidarity and cooperation by people in North and South who hope to see a more decent and civilized world.

Throughout the Oslo years, these programs continued steadily, with a sharp peak in 2000: Clinton's final year, and Barak's. The current euphemism for these programs is “disengagement” from Gaza and “convergence” in the West Bank – in Western rhetoric, Ehud Olmert's courageous program of withdrawal from the occupied territories. The reality, as usual, is quite different.

The Gaza “disengagement” was openly announced as a West Bank expansion plan. Having turned Gaza into a disaster area, sane Israeli hawks realized that there was no point leaving a few thousand settlers taking the best land and scarce resources, protected by a large part of the IDF. It made more sense to send them to the West Bank and Golan Heights, where new settlement programs were announced, while turning Gaza into “the world's largest prison,” as Israeli human rights groups accurately call it. West Bank “Convergence” formalizes these programs of annexation, cantonization, and imprisonment. With decisive US support, Israel is annexing valuable lands and the most important resources of the West Bank (primarily water), while carrying out settlement and infrastructure projects that divide the shrinking Palestinian territories into unviable cantons, virtually separated from one another and from whatever pitiful corner of Jerusalem will be left to Palestinians. All are to be imprisoned as Israel takes over the Jordan Valley, and of course any other access to the outside world.

All of these programs are recognized to be illegal, in violation of numerous Security Council resolutions and the unanimous decision of the World Court any part of the “separation wall” that is built to “defend” the settlements is “ipso facto” illegal (U.S. Justice Buerghenthal, in a separate declaration). Hence about 80–85% of the wall is illegal, as is the entire “convergence” program. But for a self-designated outlaw state and its clients, such facts are minor irrelevancies.

Currently, the US and Israel demand that Hamas accept the 2002 Arab League Beirut proposal for full normalization of relations with Israel after withdrawal in accord with the international

consensus. The proposal has long been accepted by the PLO, and it has also been formally accepted by the “supreme leader” of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei. Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah has made it clear that Hezbollah would not disrupt such an agreement if it is accepted by Palestinians. Hamas has repeatedly indicated its willingness to negotiate in these terms.

The facts are doctrinally unacceptable, hence mostly suppressed. What we see, instead, is the stern warning to Hamas by the editors of the New York Times that their formal agreement to the Beirut peace plan is “an admission ticket to the real world, a necessary rite of passage in the progression from a lawless opposition to a lawful government.” Like others, the NYT editors fail to mention that the US and Israel forcefully reject this proposal, and are alone in doing so among relevant actors. Furthermore, they reject it not merely in rhetoric, but far more importantly, in deeds. We see at once who constitutes the “lawless opposition” and who speaks for them. But that conclusion cannot be expressed, even entertained, in respectable circles.

The only meaningful support for Palestinians facing national destruction is from Hezbollah. For this reason alone it follows that Hezbollah must be severely weakened or destroyed, just as the PLO had to be evicted from Lebanon in 1982. But Hezbollah is too deeply embedded within Lebanese society to be eradicated, so Lebanon too must be largely destroyed. An expected benefit for the US and Israel was to enhance the credibility of threats against Iran by eliminating a Lebanese-based deterrent to a possible attack. But none of this turned out as planned. Much as in Iraq, and elsewhere, Bush administration planners have created catastrophes, even for the interests they represent. That is the primary reason for the unprecedented criticism of the administration among the foreign policy elite, even before the invasion of Iraq.

In the background lie more far-reaching and lasting concerns: to ensure what is called “stability” in the reigning ideology. “Stability,” in simple words, means obedience. “Stability” is undermined

by states that do not strictly follow orders, secular nationalists, Islamists who are not under control (in contrast, the Saudi monarchy, the oldest and most valuable US ally, is fine), etc. Such “destabilizing” forces are particularly dangerous when their programs are attractive to others, in which case they are called “viruses” that must be destroyed. “Stability” is enhanced by loyal client states. Since 1967, it has been assumed that Israel can play this role, along with other “peripheral” states. Israel has become virtually an off-shore US military base and high-tech center, the natural consequence of its rejection of security in favor of expansion in 1971, and repeatedly since. These policies are subject to little internal debate, whoever holds state power. The policies extend world-wide, and in the Middle East, their significance is enhanced by one of the leading principles of foreign policy since World War II (and for Britain before that): to ensure control over Middle East energy resources, recognized for 60 years to be “a stupendous source of strategic power” and “one of the greatest material prizes in world history.”

The standard Western version is that the July 2006 invasion was justified by legitimate outrage over capture of two Israeli soldiers at the border. The posture is cynical fraud. The US and Israel, and the West generally, have little objection to capture of soldiers, or even to the far more severe crime of kidnapping civilians (or of course to killing civilians). That had been Israeli practice in Lebanon for many years, and no one ever suggested that Israel should therefore be invaded and largely destroyed. Western cynicism was revealed with even more dramatic clarity as the current upsurge of violence erupted after Palestinian militants captured an Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, on June 25. That too elicited huge outrage, and support for Israel’s sharp escalation of its murderous assault on Gaza. The scale is reflected in casualties: in June, 36 Palestinian civilians were killed in Gaza; in July, the numbers more than quadrupled to over 170, dozens of them children. The posture of outrage was, again, cynical fraud, as demonstrated dramatically, and conclusively, by the reaction to Israel’s kidnapping of two Gaza civilians, the Mua-