



# Noam Chomsky: Why America and Israel Are the Greatest Threats to Peace

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It is not easy to escape from one’s skin, to see the world differently from the way it is presented to us day after day. But it is useful to try. Let’s take a few examples.

The war drums are beating ever more loudly over Iran. Imagine the situation to be reversed.

Iran is carrying out a murderous and destructive low-level war against Israel with great-power participation. Its leaders announce that negotiations are going nowhere. Israel refuses to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty and allow inspections, as Iran has done. Israel continues to defy the overwhelming international call for a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the region. Throughout, Iran enjoys the support of its superpower patron.

Iranian leaders are therefore announcing their intention to bomb Israel, and prominent Iranian military analysts report that the attack may happen before the U.S. elections.

Iran can use its powerful air force and new submarines sent by Germany, armed with nuclear missiles and stationed off the coast of Israel. Whatever the timetable, Iran is counting on its superpower backer to join if not lead the assault. U.S. defense secretary Leon Panetta says that while we do not favor such an attack, as a sovereign country Iran will act in its best interests.

All unimaginable, of course, though it is actually happening, with the cast of characters reversed. True, analogies are never exact, and this one is unfair – to Iran.

Like its patron, Israel resorts to violence at will. It persists in illegal settlement in occupied territory, some annexed, all in brazen defiance of international law and the U.N. Security Council. It has repeatedly carried out brutal attacks against Lebanon and the imprisoned people of Gaza, killing tens of thousands without credible pretext.

Thirty years ago Israel destroyed an Iraqi nuclear reactor, an act that has recently been praised, avoiding the strong evidence, even from U.S. intelligence, that the bombing did not end Saddam Hussein’s nuclear weapons program but rather initiated it. Bombing of Iran might have the same effect.

Iran too has carried out aggression – but during the past several hundred years, only under the U.S.-backed regime of the shah, when it conquered Arab islands in the Persian Gulf.

Iran engaged in nuclear development programs under the shah, with the strong support of official Washington. The Iranian government is brutal and repressive, as are Washington’s allies in the region. The most important ally, Saudi Arabia, is the most extreme Islamic fundamentalist regime, and spends enormous funds spreading its radical Wahhabist doctrines elsewhere. The gulf dictatorships, also favored U.S. allies, have harshly repressed any popular effort to join the Arab Spring.

The Nonaligned Movement – the governments of most of the world’s population – is now meeting in Teheran. The group has vigorously endorsed Iran’s right to enrich uranium, and some members – India, for example – adhere to the harsh U.S. sanctions program only partially and reluctantly.

The NAM delegates doubtless recognize the threat that dominates discussion in the West, lucidly articulated by Gen. Lee Butler, former head of the U.S. Strategic Command: “It is dangerous in the extreme that in the cauldron of animosities that we call the Middle East,” one nation should arm itself with nuclear weapons, which “inspires other nations to do so.”

Butler is not referring to Iran, but to Israel, which is regarded in the Arab countries and in Europe as posing the greatest threat to peace. In the Arab world, the United States is ranked second as a threat, while Iran, though disliked, is far less feared. Indeed in many polls majorities hold that the region would be more secure if Iran had nuclear weapons to balance the threats they perceive.

If Iran is indeed moving toward nuclear-weapons capability – this is still unknown to U.S. intelligence – that may be because it is “inspired to do so” by the U.S.-Israeli threats, regularly issued in explicit violation of the U.N. Charter.

Why then is Iran the greatest threat to world peace, as seen in official Western discourse? The primary reason is acknowledged by U.S. military and intelligence and their Israeli counterparts: Iran might deter the resort to force by the United States and Israel.

Furthermore Iran must be punished for its “successful defiance,” which was Washington’s charge against Cuba half a century ago, and still the driving force for the U.S. assault against Cuba that continues despite international condemnation.

Other events featured on the front pages might also benefit from a different perspective. Suppose that Julian Assange had leaked Russian documents revealing important information that Moscow wanted to conceal from the public, and that circumstances were otherwise identical.

Sweden would not hesitate to pursue its sole announced concern, accepting the offer to interrogate Assange in London. It would declare that if Assange returned to Sweden (as he has agreed to do), he would not be extradited to Russia, where chances of a fair trial would be slight.

Sweden would be honored for this principled stand. Assange would be praised for performing a public service – which, of course, would not obviate the need to take the accusations against him as seriously as in all such cases.

The most prominent news story of the day here is the U.S. election. An appropriate perspective was provided by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, who held that “We may have democracy in this country, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we cannot have both.”

Guided by that insight, coverage of the election should focus on the impact of wealth on policy, extensively analyzed in the recent study “Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America” by Martin Gilens. He found that the vast majority are “powerless to shape government policy” when their preferences diverge from the affluent, who pretty much get what they want when it matters to them.

Small wonder, then, that in a recent ranking of the 31 members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in terms of social justice, the United States placed 27th, despite its extraordinary advantages.

Or that rational treatment of issues tends to evaporate in the electoral campaign, in ways sometimes verging on comedy.

To take one case, Paul Krugman reports that the much-admired Big Thinker of the Republican Party, Paul Ryan, declares that he derives his ideas about the financial system from a character in a fantasy novel – “Atlas Shrugged” – who calls for the use of gold coins instead of paper currency.

It only remains to draw from a really distinguished writer, Jonathan Swift. In “Gulliver’s Travels,” his sages of Lagado carry all their goods with them in packs on their backs, and thus could use them for barter without the encumbrance of gold. Then the economy and democracy could truly flourish – and best of all, inequality would sharply decline, a gift to the spirit of Justice Brandeis.

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