

Anti-Semitism, Zionism, and the Palestinians

Noam Chomsky

It's useful to mention a moral principle that's so trivial it's embarrassing - the reason for doing so is it's near universally disregarded. It's easy (and not even gratifying) to criticise and condemn the crimes of others. It's a little harder to look in the mirror and ask what we're doing because it's usually not very pretty, and if we're minimally decent we're going to try to do something about it. When we do, depending on where you are in the world the problems can vary. In some countries it can mean prison, brutal torture, or getting your brains blown out. In countries like ours its condemnation, the loss of job opportunities, or something mild by international standards. It's much harder than to just talk about how awful the other guy is. For example, there's a US literary genre developing with many books, articles and passionate discussions about a flaw in our character: 'We don't react properly to the crimes of others', and 'What's the matter with us that prevents us from doing this?' There are obviously much bigger problems - like why do we continue to participate in massive atrocities, repression, terror, but we don't do anything about it? But there's no literary genre on that. All of that shouldn't be necessary to say, but I've said it. Beginning with anti-Semitism. In the US when I was growing up anti-Semitism was a severe problem. In the 1930's depression when my father finally had enough money to buy a second-hand car and could take the family on a trip to the mountains, if we wanted to stop at a motel we had to check it didn't have a sign saying 'Restricted'. 'Restricted' meant no Jews, so not for us; of course no Blacks. Even when I got to Harvard 50 years ago you could cut the anti-Semitism with a knife. There was almost no Jewish faculty. I think the first Jewish maths professor was appointed while I was there in the early '50s. One of the reasons MIT (where I now am) became a great university is because a lot of people who went on to become academic stars couldn't get jobs at Harvard-so they came to the engineering school down the street. Just 30 years ago (1960s) when my wife and I had young children, we decided to move to a Boston suburb (we couldn't afford the rents near Cambridge any longer). We asked a real estate agent about one town we were interested in, he told us: 'Well, you wouldn't be happy there.' Meaning they don't allow Jews. It's not like sending people to concentration and termination camps but that's anti-Semitism. That was almost completely national. By now Jews in the US are the most privileged and influential part of the population. You find occasional instances of anti-Semitism but they are marginal. There's plenty of racism, but it's directed against Blacks, Latinos, Arabs are targets of enormous racism, and those problems are real. Anti-Semitism is no longer a problem, fortunately. It's raised, but it's raised because privileged people want to make sure they have total control, not just 98% control. That's why anti-Semitism is becoming an issue. Not because of the threat of anti-Semitism; they want to make sure there's no critical look at the policies the US (and they themselves) support in the Middle East. With regard to anti-Semitism, the distinguished Israeli statesman Abba Eban pointed out the main task of Israeli propaganda (they would call it exclamation, what's called 'propaganda' when others do it) is to make it clear to the world there's no difference between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. By anti-Zionism he meant criticisms of the current policies of the State of Israel. So there's no difference between criticism of policies of the State of Israel and anti-Semitism, because if he can establish 'that' then he can undercut all criticism by invoking the Nazis and that will silence people. We should bear it in mind when there's talk in the US about anti-Semitism.

To turn to what are called the problems of Israel / Palestine, that's a misnomer. It should be called the problems of US-Israel versus Palestine. Britain is also involved in its usual manner - a British Foreign Officer in WW II said that 'from now on Britain is not going to be an independent actor in world affairs, its going to be junior partner to the US.' Essentially correct. (There are less flattering terms used now in the British press, but the picture is about the same.) Britain doesn't play an initiating, active role in the conflict but a passive role essentially supporting the US. The US plays an overwhelming and decisive role. Europe can play an independent role; insofar as it chooses not to act and to use its influence it is essentially supporting what the US does. I'm not going to try to run through the history of the conflict, so let's take the current Intifada and the military aspects which are revealing. A few weeks ago in the Hebrew press there was a report by a well known, respected military correspondent attending a meeting of high Israeli military officials discussing the military tactics in the Intifada. One of the officers asked for information about ordnance: How many bullets got fired? The information came back from the IDF (the Israeli army) that "in the first few days of the Intifada [Sept 30th 2000 and the next few days] the IDF fired a million bullets." There was some surprise, it sounded high, and one officer said kind of bitterly (they don't necessarily like the orders they're given to carry out): 'That means approximately one bullet for every Palestinian child.' Remember what was going on then, some teenagers throwing stones. The same article reported another military source who gave a graphic illustration of how it works. He reported that an official from the Palestinian authority who had a European visitor in the first weeks of the Intifada wanted to illustrate to him how it works, so he had his body guard shoot a single bullet. That was followed by two hours of heavy Israeli gun fire aiming at no particular target in response to a single bullet that was fired. In the first month of the Intifada (according to Israeli sources) the ratio of deaths was about 20 to 1 (75 Palestinians / 4 Israeli soldiers in the Occupied Territories). Another example, in the first days of the Intifada Israel immediately began using what are called in the press 'Israeli helicopters'. They're not Israeli helicopters, they're US helicopters with Israeli pilots that were used to attack civilian complexes, killing and wounding dozens of people. That was sort of reported, it wasn't a secret. That's in response to stone throwing, at most. The US did react to that officially. October 3rd 2000, the Clinton administration made the biggest deal in a decade to send new military helicopters to Israel, along with more parts for Apache Attack helicopters - the most advanced in the arsenal which had been sent in September. It's not that they didn't know what they were using them for, you could read that in the newspapers. They were using them to attack and murder civilians. But they needed more because a million bullets in the first few days isn't enough so we need to send them attack helicopters and missiles. When you hear of the atrocities in Gaza (July 22nd 2002, 14 civilians killed by a helicopter missile attack) that's thanks to the US government, and its allies who didn't raise a finger. How did the American press respond to this? They did report helicopters attacking civilians, but the deal made by the Clinton administration (the biggest in a decade for military helicopters) went literally without report. To be precise, one opinion column in a small newspaper in Virginia mentioned it. That's it for the 'free' press. It's not that they didn't know about it. It was all over the Israeli press, and there were queries to the Pentagon from European reporters asking what are the conditions on the sale of these helicopters. They were told there are no conditions, we don't second guess Israeli commanders, they use if for what they want - and they knew what they were using it for. Two weeks later Amnesty International had a report condemning this and no mention of that, which continues. The reason is, it is considered the right thing to do for the West. Remember Israel is virtually a US military base, an offshoot of the US military system. The same reporter quoted a General as saying: 'Israel is no longer a state with an army, it's now an army with a state.' If you're talking about the Israeli government you're talking about the military. The top political figures are almost always ex-Generals, chiefs of staff and so on. It's not a small army, according to the IDF and analysts their air, naval, armour forces are larger and more advanced than those of any NATO power outside of the US, and as an offshoot it certainly is. So we have an army with a State, the army's basically a branch of the Pentagon. That's the system and it's considered right for them to use these kinds of tactics - a million bullets in the first few days, US helicopters to murder civilians. So we send them more helicopters and so on, because it's a normal way for things to be, and it goes way back. If you know your history of the British Empire you can find many examples. To cite one, 1932, the distinguished British statesman Lloyd George wrote in his diary: 'We have to reserve the right to bomb niggers.' He was referring to the fact Britain had just succeeded in undermining an international disarmament conference which was attempting to put restrictions on the use of air power to attack civilians. Britain very quickly understood that use of air power to attack civilians was far more cost effective and murderous than using ground forces. In parts of the Empire where they no longer had the power to control by ground forces they turned to air power - in the Arab world, against Kurds, Afghans, Iraqis, others who were not front pages. Air power was turning out to be a very effective way to control and suppress civilian populations, hence Britain naturally wanted to undermine disarmament conventions which would block it. (A precedent its successors as global rulers also follow.) Lloyd George was commenting on the British success in this, praising the Government for undermining the treaty as: 'We have to reserve the right to bomb niggers.' That's a fundamental principle of European civilisation, and basic principles like that have a long life. People usually don't say it publicly, but Lloyd George was correctly articulating their inner thoughts and the reason that lies behind them, and what I just described in the first few days of the Intifada is a perfect example.

We could go on from there up till today, and trace it back to the earliest days of what has been from the beginning a harsh and brutal occupation. In which for the most part Israel itself was immune from retaliation from within the territories. It carried out oppressive, brutal often murderous policies - mainly the usual imperial techniques: humiliation, degradation, making sure that what are called the 'Arabushi' (Hebrew slang for 'niggers') don't raise their heads and if they do they get beaten down, meanwhile taking the land and resources, with the US army. It's a US-Israeli operation which continues until today. All of that was fine. It's only when the Arabushi did raise their heads and the niggers started bombing us that it becomes a horrifying atrocity. It is an atrocity, but it's not the first and it's not the largest, something we would easily recognise if we were able to rise to the level of looking in the mirror, thinking about ourselves and what we do.

Let me turn to the political. Once the Arabushi are beaten down and they don't raise their heads any more then you can talk, and you move to the stage called 'diplomacy'.

There was another recent article in the Hebrew press, this time our main newspaper, the New York Times. The article (by a former high official in the Foreign Office and vice president of Tel Aviv University) was translated into English. In it he was reputing the idea that General / Prime Minister Sharon doesn't have a strategy. He said Sharon does have a strategy, one which goes way back. In the 1970s and '80s high officials in the security establishment were paying close attention to what was going on in South Africa, regarding it as a model that Israel should follow. What was going on in South Africa was an effort to establish 'bantustans' - independent black run homelands. The South Africa government in the depths of the Apartheid regime was trying to gain international support for the idea that these black-run States were viable independent States: the leadership was black, the police forces were black, the population was mostly black. To gain international support for them South Africa subsidised them, they actually tried to develop industry, keep them viable somehow. Well the world wouldn't go along, but the Israeli and I'm sure the US establishment was keeping a close eye on them. (South Africa was an ally of the US and Britain throughout this period. As late as 1988 the US government identified Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress as "one of the more notorious terrorist organisations of the world." The US congress did try and impose sanctions on South Africa, which the Regan administration finally passed after vetoing it but found ways around so that US trade with South Africa actually increased in the late 1980s. Britain was playing similar games with Rhodesia, South Africa.) In 1993 the US and Israel moved to trying to impose a South African style solution-it's called the Oslo Peace Process. The Oslo Peace Process was described quite accurately by one of the leading Israeli doves, Shlomo Ben-Ami (Foreign Minister under Ehud Barak and chief negotiator at Camp David). He said: "The goal of the Oslo Process is to establish for the Palestinians a neo-colonial dependency which will be permanent." That is to establish a bantustan in the Occupied Territories. (He was from the dovish end of the spectrum but it's a pretty narrow spectrum, as in most countries.) Throughout the Oslo process Israel and the US jointly (you can't do it without US authorisation or support) moved to institute a neo-colonial dependency that would be permanent, bantustans essentially as the model. So US-funded settlement programmes continued right through the Oslo years, peaking in the last Clinton / Barak years. And settlement plans were continued still further, Sharon escalated it - there is a spectrum but it's the same policy. The settlements are built with an eye for the future-take a look at a map. Take the map presented at Camp David. Camp David was described by the US and much of the West as an amazing, magnanimous, generous offer by Clinton and Barak which the terrible Palestinians turned down and so therefore are responsible for their own fate. In the US no maps were presented. That's crucial if you want to determine how magnanimous and generous the offer was. If maps weren't presented there's a reason: the maps would tell you exactly how magnanimous and generous an offer it is (and it's better for the public not to know things like that, particularly when you're praising the magnanimity and magnificence of our great leaders). Maps were published in Israel. If you look at the maps you'll discover exactly how generous the Camp David offers were, and what Ben-Ami meant when talking of a 'permanent neo-colonial dependency.' They reflect the settlement policies of the Peres and Rabin Governments. Israel takes what's called Jerusalem. Jerusalem is a vastly expanded area with no resemblance to the pre-1967 Jerusalem which was effectively annexed in violation of Security Council orders. To the East of what's called Jerusalem there's an Israeli settlement (which includes a city, Ma'al Adumim) extending virtually to Jericho, (which was established to all effect with the purpose of bisecting the West Bank. (A town and settlement means infrastructure, roads, developments on the sides of the roads and so forth). There's another development in the north going to the settlement of Ariel and beyond which bisects the Northern area. That's three basic cantons: one in the north, another Nablus, another central around Ramallah, another Southern, parts of Bethlehem. These three cantons are separated from a small part of East Jerusalem which would be under Palestinian administration. (Jerusalem is traditionally the centre of Palestinian cultural, commercial, and other life in fact for the whole region.) That's the West bank: four cantons, separated from Gaza which is a fifth, and the fate of Gaza was unclear. That's the generous settlement. You can see why maps aren't presented. It should be stated however that Clinton / Barak did improve the situation at Camp David, as prior to it the Palestinians in the West Bank were divided into over 200 separated areas. (Some a couple of square kilometers surrounded by barriers and road blocks, mainly for the purpose of humiliation and degradation, they didn't serve any military function to speak of.) They reduced it from over 227 to only 4. That's a step forward, a step towards the South African solution, and notice from below because the South African bantustans (whatever you think about them) were reasonably viable by comparison to what was being offered the Palestinians. The settlement programmes also insured the main resources (the best land in the West Bank, the nice suburbs of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem) primarily were and would remain under effective Israeli control with this outcome, and the Palestinians would be able to have a neo-colonial dependency. Under the Oslo agreements the Palestinian Authority which was established had the same role granted by South Africa to the leadership of the black homelands. Their primary role in South Africa was to ensure the security and safety of the white population, to prevent that notorious terrorist organisation Nelson Mandela and the ANC from harming the people that count. Meanwhile the people that count reserve the 'right to bomb niggers' - that's a constant. But the Arabs don't shoot back, for if they do they become notorious terrorists. And the same is true in the Palestinian bantustan. It was intended that the Palestinian Authority should be brutal, repressive and corrupt. That's exactly what Israel and the US wanted, that's why they liked Arafat. What they're criticising him for is correct, he's supposed to be brutal, corrupt, repressive and control the population, to sustain the neo-colonial dependency. Prime Minister Rahbin was very frank about it, right after Oslo in the Hebrew press he said 'look, if we give security control over to the Palestinian Authority they'll be able to control the population without any concern about the high court, or human rights organisations, or mothers and fathers who may not like what their children are doing', and so on. And if Arafat robbed European money, or his Authority lived in villas in Gaza while the population is starving, that was fine as long as they did their job - they control the population and ensure that the neo-colonial dependency is established, and make sure the people that count don't get harmed. They can bomb the niggers but they themselves don't get harmed. That was the policy of the Clinton administration, and so it continues, until they raise their heads. Then we get one million bullets, helicopters, two hours of firing after a pistol shot, the horror from the West over the fact that the wrong people are being attacked by atrocious actions - and they are undoubtedly atrocious, but the gun fire is the easy way. That's essentially it, we can choose to disregard it but technically the facts are pretty straight.

Questions: We recently had a demonstration (estimates of 400,000 people) calling for no war on Iraq and freedom for Palestine. Do you think, to some degree, we are the Achilles heel of the Bush / Blair alliance, and what effect do you think a successful peace movement in Britain would have on the peace movement in the US?

Noam Chomsky: (I'll have to be brief about each of the questions, unfortunately, as they deserve long answers.)

The American ideological leaders understand exactly what you're saying and therefore the demonstrations in England were very much played down. The Palestine issue was barely mentioned, if at all. And the reasons are very clear. They know that what you describe is the effect that happens: there's an interaction. There's an active peace movement in the US too. Big demonstrations took place last weekend, there's more planned, and yes that's the Achilles heel. Popular courses and movements don't follow orders. Populations (especially in more democratic countries like ours) can influence and effect policies. That's the reason why there is the suppression of information I described (including the marginalisation of the protests in London), because of the realisation that people who have power - if they choose to organise, act and exercise it - can reverse these processes, both in Palestine and in the case of the war against Iraq.

On the great powers UN, let's not mislead ourselves, the UN can act exactly as far as the great powers allow it to act. That means primarily the US-Britain as kind of a reflexive support. What will it allow them to do, what's the role of the UN? The countries in the UN would like to do more, such as the Non-Aligned Movement. The Arab position representing 80% of the world population is totally different from that of the Western powers. That's usually true but they're given very short shrift. So that's the role of the UN, what we allow it to do.

What's in it for Blair? The US is the richest, most powerful country in the world. Britain can be the junior partner, the attack dog when needed, fits very well into British history. Then it gets whatever benefits come from following the big guy. Or it can try to pursue an independent course. That means facing costs, being honest, being a moral force and an effective force, but those are harder traits.

Fox, CNN and the rest, is it outright propaganda? Surely not! There are people in the media who have professional integrity, especially reporters on the scene. As what they do gets filtered up through the institutions, the editorial staffs and the forces that operate on them (corporate and state powers) the picture changes. Things get filtered, shaped, organised, sometimes totally excluded. I gave cases of total exclusion, something pretty hard to achieve even in totalitarian States hence quite remarkable when it happens in a free society, where it's done voluntarily. The effect is a highly distorted version of the world. It may not be the one reporters see, but it's the one that works its way through to the system that's presented.

Public support for attack on Iraq? That's hard to answer because it depends what the public thinks. The US declared a national emergency in the 1980s because of the great danger to the national security of the US posed by the government of Nicaragua. The President (the brave cowboy in the White House) told us they were only two days march from Texas. The Secretary of State (a moderate in the administration) informed Congress that there is a cancer right here in our land mass, who's following the plans of Mein Kampf and intending to conquer the hemisphere. And if that wasn't bad enough there was a mad dog, Gadaffi, who was 'trying to expel America from the world' as Regan put it, by arming the Nicaraguans so that they could fight us on our home soil. And people were frightened. Now they're being frightened by Saddam, who's undoubtedly a monster. He's nowhere near as dangerous as when daddy Bush, Colin Powell and the rest were coddling him, giving him aid and offering him the means to develop weapons of mass destruction. Just as anyone would! At a time when he was really dangerous, and after his worst atrocities were past - the ones Blair tells you about - Britain and the US continued to support him. You didn't hear about the gassing of the Kurds then. He's still a threat to anyone within his reach though the reach fortunately is much smaller, you can tell from the reactions of the countries in the region. But it's easy to terrify people with the threat Saddam's going to come and get you. And when people are frightened they tend to support the use of violence. Over time (with educational efforts, organising) that reduces and people's actual understanding comes out. And it turns out the main concern of Americans (every poll show this) is the economy. The Bush administration is carrying out a major assault against the population here, the way the same people did under Regan-they're recycled Reganites. The first thing they did under Regan was drive the country into a deep deficit to undercut the possibility of social spending. The Bush administration is doing the same. It worries people, and the last thing the administration wants them to think about (with the 2004 election coming up) is how do you take care of your elderly mother, what's happening to your pension, why is the environment being destroyed, why don't I have health care, why don't I have a job? They want them to huddle in fear because a monster is going to come and get them and therefore they'd better support power, the whole package. So public support looks high but it's extremely thin and can disappear very quickly.

The Hebrew press is much more open than the English language press, and there's a very obvious reason: Hebrew is a secret language, you only read it if you're inside the tribe. Like most cultures it's a tribal culture. I don't want to exaggerate, but the English translations on the internet are very revealing and very interesting.

Influence of Israel over the US elite? In my opinion essentially nothing. They're very close. People like Richard Perle and others inside the central power group within the US happen to be close to the ultra right wing in Israel. Perle was actually writing position papers for Benjamin Netanyahu (who's to the hawkish side of Sharon) just a few years ago. So there's a lot of interaction but Israel can have no influence on the US. If the US doesn't want them to do something it tells them and they follow orders. We saw that with the pullout from Ramallah a couple of days ago. That same point extends to the power of the Jewish lobby and its backers - technically it's not a Jewish lobby, it's a pro-Israel lobby. A substantial part of the lobby happen to be Christian fundamentalists who in the US are a very important force. The US is one of the most Fundamentalist cultures in the world - the proportion of people who believe that the world was created 6,000 years ago, there are miracles and so on, is astounding. It's a fundamentalist society. It's not institutionalised, so it's not like Iran with fundamentalist fundamentalism, but our culture is highly fundamentalist. The right wing fundamentalist Christian block is very strong and mixed - some are activists in the Solidarity movement, but overwhelmingly it's jingoistic and supportive of Israel, also there's plenty of anti-Semitism. That's not a contradiction. If you read the Book of Revelations (which they take seriously) you'll see why. So you can be both an anti-Semantic Christian fundamentalist and a strong supporter of Israeli oppression and atrocities. It's not a contradiction and it's a real political force. So there is an Israel lobby and it has influence insofar as it is allied to actual US power. Where it runs into any conflict with US power it dissolves. (Another factor is they have enormous influence over the media because they happen to be strong within the intellectual community.) So yes, they're powerful, but I wouldn't exaggerate their power.

A lot of what's going on now is aimed at keeping Bush in power. Take the war on Iraq: their timing is critical - the war on Iraq has to take place over the winter, you can't fight in the desert through mid-spring, so it's got to be around February. It can't take place in 2004 as you're in the middle of a presidential campaign. At the time of the presidential campaign they want to make sure they have a hero running for power who has a great victory behind him and maybe the population won't pay attention to what's being done to them, they'll be praising the hero. So the war has to be over by then and there has to be a victory, so it has to be right now. So the tax cut which is already harming the economy, and will be devastating, that's timed to come in after the 2004 election. There is careful planning, but will it work?

Is it a war for oil? Anything in that region of the world has something to do with oil, that's not even questionable. Iraq has the second largest oil reserves in the world, whoever controls it will be an extremely powerful force in world affairs - apart from the fact there are huge profits to be made. And it's always been clear that sooner or later the US will move to take control over this. But that's been true for a long time. I don't think that's to do with the timing, it's in the background.

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This is an edited transcript of a live video link-up from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to public meetings called by the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign, and other groups & organisations, throughout Scotland and the north of England, on Friday 11 October 2002.

Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign
Peace & Justice Centre
Princes Street
Edinburgh, EH2 4BJ

Tel: +44 (0)131 538 0257

email: nalsolcam@bluevonder.co.uk