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Chomsky

On Gaza

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Voniati : The international public opinion and especially the Muslim world seem to have great expectations from the historic election of Obama. Can we, in your opinion, expect any real change regarding the US approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Chomsky: Not much. Quite the contrary: it may be harsher than before. In the case of Gaza, Obama maintained silence, he didn't say a word. He said well there's only one president so I can't talk about it. Of course he was talking about a lot of other things but he chose not to talk about this. His campaign did repeat a statement that he had made while visiting Israel six months earlier –he had visited Sderot where the rockets hit- and he said “if this were happening to my daughters, I wouldn't think of any reaction as legitimate”, but he couldn't say anything about Palestinian children. Now, the attack on Gaza was at time so that it ended right before the inauguration, which is what I expected. I presume that the point was so that they could make sure that Obama didn't have to say something, so he didn't. And then he gave his first foreign policy declaration, it was a couple of days later when he appointed George Mitchell as his emissary, and he said nothing about Gaza except that “our paramount interest is preserving the security of Israel”. Palestine apparently doesn't have any requirement of security. And then in his declaration he said of course we are not going to deal with Hamas -the elected government the US immediately, as soon as the government was elected in a free election the US and Israel with the help of European Union immediately started severely punishing the Palestinian population for voting in the “wrong way” in a free election and that's what we mean by democracy. The only substantive comment he made in the declaration was to say that the arab peace plan had constructive elements, because it called for a normalization of relations with Israel and he urged the arab states to proceed with the normalization of relations. Now, he is an intelligent person, he knows that that was not what the arab peace plan said. The arab peace plan called for a two state settlement on the international border that is in accord with the long standing international consensus that the US has blocked for over 30 years and in that context of the two state settlement we should even proceed further and move towards a normalization of relations with Israel. Well, Obama carefully excluded the main content about the two state settlement and just talked about the corollary, for which a two state settlement is a precondition. Now that's not an oversight, it can't be. That's a careful wording, sending the message that we are not going to change their (Israel's) rejectionist policy. We 'll continue to be opposed to the international consensus on this issue, and everything else he said accords with it. We will continue in other words to support Israel's settlement policies- those policies are undermining any possible opportunity or hope for a viable Palestinian entity of some kind. And it's a continued reliance on force in both parts of occupied Palestine. That's the only conclusion you could draw.

Voniati : Let us talk about the timing of the assault on the Gaza Strip. Was it accidental or did it purposefully happen in a vacuum of power? To explain myself, the global financial crisis has challenged the almost absolute US global hegemony. Furthermore, the attack on Gaza was launched during the presidential change of guard. So, did this vacuum of power benefit the Israeli assault on Gaza?

Chomsky: Well, the timing was certainly convenient since attention was focused elsewhere. There was no strong pressure on the president or other high officials of the US to say anything about it. I mean Bush was on his way out, and Obama could hide behind the pretext that he's not yet in. And pretty much the same was in Europe, so that they could just say, well we can't talk about it now, it's too difficult a time. The assault was well chosen in that respect. It was well chosen in other respects too: the bombing began shortly after Hamas had offered a return to the 2005

agreement, which in fact was supported by the US. They said, ok, let's go back to the 2005 agreement that was before Hamas was elected. That means no violence and open the borders. Closing the borders is a siege, it's an act of war..... not very harmful but it's an act of war. Israel of all countries insists on that. I mean Israel went to war twice in 1956 and 1967 on the grounds, it claimed, that its access to the outside world was being hampered. It wasn't a siege, its access through the Gulf of Aqaba was being hampered. Well if that is an act of war then certainly a siege is, and so it's understood.

So Khaled Mashaal asked for an end of the state of the war, which would include opening the borders. Well, a couple of days later, when Israel didn't react to that, Israel attacked. The attack was timed for Saturday morning – the Sabbath day in Israel – at about 11:30, which happens to be the moment when children are leaving school and crowds are milling in the streets of this very heavily crowded city... The explicit target was police cadets... Now, there are civilians, in fact we now know that for several months the legal department of the Israeli army had been arguing against this plan because it said it was a direct attack against civilians. And of course, plenty civilians will be killed if you bomb a crowded city, especially at a time like that. But finally the legal department was sort of bludgeoned into silence by the military so they said alright. So that's when they opened –on a Sabbath morning. Now two weeks later, Israel – on Saturday as well- blocked the humanitarian aid because they didn't want to disgrace Sabbath. Well, that's interesting too. But the main point about the timing was that there was an effort to undercut the efforts for a peaceful settlement and it was terminated just in time to prevent pressure on Obama to say something about it. It's hard to believe that this isn't conscious. We know that it was very meticulously planned for many months beforehand.

Voniat : In a recent interview with LBC, you said that the policies of Hamas are more conducive to peace than the US's or Israel's.

Chomsky: Oh yes, that's clear.

Voniat : Also, that the policies of Hamas are closer to international consensus on a political peaceful settlement than those of Israel and the US. Can you explain your stance?

Chomsky: Well for several years Hamas has been very clear and explicit, repeatedly, that they favor a two state settlement on the international border. They said they would not recognize Israel but they would accept a two state settlement and a prolonged truce, maybe decades, maybe 50 years. Now, that's not exactly the international consensus but it's pretty close to it. On the other hand, the United States and Israel flatly reject it. They reject it in deeds, that's why they are building all the construction development activities in the West Bank, not only in violation of international laws, US and Israel know that the illegal constructions are designed explicitly to convert the West Bank into what the architect of the policy, Ariel Sharon, called bantustan. Israel takes over what it wants, break up Palestine into unviable fragments. That's undermining a political settlement. So in deeds, yes of course they are undermining it, but also in words: that goes back to 1976 when the US vetoed the Security Council resolution put forward by the arab states which called for a two state settlement and it goes around until today. In December, last December, at the meetings of the UN's General Assembly there were many resolutions passed. One of them was a resolution calling for recognition of the right of self-determination of the Palestinian people. It didn't call for a state, just the right of self-determination. It passed with 173 to 5. The 5 were the US, Israel and a few small pacific islands. Of course that can't be reported in the US. So they are rejecting it even in words, as well as –more significantly- in acts. On the other hand, Hamas comes pretty close to accepting it. Now, the demand which Obama repeated on Hamas is that they must meet three conditions: they must recognize Israel's right to exist, they must renounce violence and they must accept past agreements, and in particular the Road Map. Well, what about the US and Israel? I mean, obviously they don't renounce violence, they reject the Road Map – technically they accepted it but Israel immediately entered 14 reservations (which weren't reported here) which completely eliminated its content, and the US went along. So the US and Israel completely violate those two conditions, and of course they violate the first, they don't recognize Palestine. So sure, there's a lot to criticize about Hamas, but on these matters they seem to be much closer to –not only international opinion- but even to a just settlement than the US and Israel are.

Voniati : On the other hand, Hamas has been accused of using human shields to hide and protect itself. Israel insists that the war was a matter of defense. Is Hamas a terrorist organization, as it is accused to be? Is Israel a terrorist state?

Chomsky: Well, Hamas is accused of using human shields, rightly or wrongly. But we know that Israel does it all the time. Is Israel a terrorist state? Well yes according to official definitions. I mean, one of the main things holding up cease fire right now is that Israel insists that it will not allow a cease fire until Hamas returns a captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit - he's very famous in the West everybody knows he was captured. Well, one day before Gilad Shalit was captured, Israeli forces went into Gaza City and kidnapped two Palestinian civilians (the Muamar Brothers) and brought them across the border to Israel in violation of international law and hid them somewhere in the huge Israeli prisons. Nobody knows what happened to them since. I mean, kidnapping civilians is a much worse crime than capturing a soldier of an attacking army. And furthermore this has been regular Israeli practice for decades. They've been kidnapping civilians in Lebanon or on the high seas... They take them to Israel, put them into prisons, sometimes keeping them as hostages for long periods. So you know, if the capturing of Gilad Shalit is a terrorist act, well, then Israel's regular practice supported by the US is incomparably worse. And that's quite apart from repeated aggression and other crimes. I don't like Hamas by any means, there is plenty to criticize about them, but if you compare their actions with US and Israel, they are minor criminals.

Voniati : Though of Jewish decent, you have been repeatedly accused of anti-Semitism. How do you respond?

Chomsky: The most important comment about that was made by the distinguished statesman Abba Eban, maybe 35 years ago, in an address to the American people. He said that there are two kinds of criticism of Zionism (by Zionism I mean the policies of the state of Israel). One is criticism by anti-Semites and the other is criticism by neurotic self-hating Jews. That eliminates 100% of possible criticism. The neurotic self-hating Jews, he actually mentioned two, I was one and I.F. Stone, a well-known writer was another). I mean that's the kind of thing that would come out of a communist party in its worst days. But you see, I can't really be called anti-semitic because I'm Jewish so I must be a neurotic self-hating Jew, by definition. The assumption is that the policies of the state of Israel are perfect, so therefore any kind of criticism must be illegitimate. And that's from Abba Eban, one of the most distinguished figures in Israel, the most westernised ... praised, considered a dove.

Voniati : How do you comment on the Davos incident concerning Erdogan's verbal attack against Peres?

Chomsky: It was impolite. You are not supposed to behave like that at Davos. But the idea that Peres was given 25 minutes to justify major atrocities and aggression, that's what's shocking. Why have that at Davos? I mean, do you allow Saddam Hussein in such a gathering to justify the invasion of Kuwait? So Erdogan reacted, in my view, not in accord with the genteel atmosphere of the collection of the people who but basically appropriate under the circumstances.

Voniati : Have you, by any chance, been informed about the Cypriot-flagged vessel "Monchegorsk" that is docked in Limassol and seems to have been carrying weapons to the Hamas-run Gaza Strip? Israel and the United States requested that the vessel be stopped...

Chomsky: I don't know about the Iranian vessel but I do know that right in the middle of the Gaza attack, Dignity was blocked in international waters and attacked by the Israeli navy and almost sunk. Now, that's a major crime. That's much worse than piracy off the coast of Somalia for example. If the Iranian vessel was stopped in international waters, that's completely illegitimate. Israel has no authority to do anything in international waters. And the talk about not sending arms to Gaza ... I mean, do they stop sending arms to Israel? I mean right in the middle of the Gaza war, the Pentagon announced that it was sending a huge shipment of armaments to Israel. Did anybody stop that? They should say that those armaments are not intended for use by the Israeli army. The Pentagon also announced that

they are being prepositioned, that is, that they re being placed in Israel for the use of the US army In other words what they re saying is –and it's been true for a long time- is that the US regards Israel as an offshore military base of its own, which they can use for their aggressive acts throughout the region