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Constructive Action?

Noam Chomsky

May 11, 2002

A year ago, the Hebrew University sociologist Baruch Kimmerling observed that “what we feared has come true ... War appears an unavoidable fate”, an “evil colonial” war. His colleague Ze’ev Sternhell noted that the Israeli leadership was now engaged in “colonial policing, which recalls the takeover by the white police of the poor neighbourhoods of the blacks in South Africa during the apartheid era”. Both stress the obvious: there is no symmetry between the “ethno-national groups” in this conflict, which is centred in territories that have been under harsh military occupation for 35 years.

The Oslo “peace process” changed the modalities of the occupation, but not the basic concept. Shortly before joining the Ehud Barak government, historian Shlomo Ben-Ami wrote that “the Oslo agreements were founded on a neo-colonialist basis, on a life of dependence of one on the other forever”. He soon became an architect of the US-Israel proposals at Camp David in 2000, which kept to this condition. At the time, West Bank Palestinians were confined to 200 scattered areas. Bill Clinton and Israeli prime minister Barak did propose an improvement: consolidation to three cantons, under Israeli control, virtually separated from one another and from the fourth

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enclave, a small area of East Jerusalem, the centre of Palestinian communications. The fifth canton was Gaza. It is understandable that maps are not to be found in the US mainstream. Nor is their prototype, the Bantustan “homelands” of apartheid South Africa, ever mentioned. No one can seriously doubt that the US role will continue to be decisive. It is crucial to understand what that role has been, and how it is internally perceived. The version of the doves is presented by the editors of the New York Times, praising President Bush’s “path-breaking speech” and the “emerging vision” he articulated. Its first element is “ending Palestinian terrorism” immediately. Some time later comes “freezing, then rolling back, Jewish settlements and negotiating new borders” to allow the establishment of a Palestinian state. If Palestinian terror ends, Israelis will be encouraged to “take the Arab League’s historic offer of full peace and recognition in exchange for an Israeli withdrawal more seriously”. But first Palestinian leaders must demonstrate that they are “legitimate diplomatic partners”.

The real world has little resemblance to this self-serving portrayal – virtually copied from the 1980s, when the US and Israel were desperately seeking to evade PLO offers of negotiation and political settlement. In the real world, the primary barrier to the “emerging vision” has been, and remains, unilateral US rejectionism. There is little new in the current “Arab League’s historic offer”.

It repeats the basic terms of a security council resolution of January 1976 which called for a political settlement on the internationally recognised borders “with appropriate arrangements ... to guarantee ... the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence of all states in the area”. This was backed by virtually the entire world, including the Arab states and the PLO, but opposed by Israel and vetoed by the US, thereby vetoing it from history. Similar initiatives have since been blocked by the US and mostly suppressed in public commentary.

Not surprisingly, the guiding principle of the occupation has been incessant humiliation. Israeli plans for Palestinians have followed the guidelines formulated by Moshe Dayan, one of the Labour leaders more sympathetic to the Palestinian plight. Thirty years ago, Dayan advised the cabinet that Israel should make it clear to refugees that “we have no solution, you shall continue to live like dogs, and whoever wishes may leave”. When challenged, he responded by citing Ben-Gurion, who said that “who- ever approaches the Zionist problem from a moral aspect is not a Zionist”. He could have also cited Chaim Weizmann, first president of Israel, who held that the fate of the “several hundred thousand negroes” in the Jewish homeland “is a matter of no consequence”.

The Palestinians have long suffered torture, terror, destruction of property, displacement and settlement, and takeover of basic resources, crucially water. These policies have relied on decisive US support and European acquiescence. “The Barak government is leaving Sharon’s government a surprising legacy,” the Israeli press reported as the transition took place: “the highest number of housing starts in the territories since ... Ariel Sharon was minister of construction and settlement in 1992 before the Oslo agreements” – funding provided by the American taxpayer. It is regularly claimed that all peace proposals have been undermined by Arab refusal to accept the existence of Israel (the facts are quite different), and by terrorists like Arafat who have forfeited “our trust”. How that trust may be regained is explained by Edward Walker, a Clinton Middle East adviser: Arafat must announce that “we put our future and fate in the hands of the US” – which has led the campaign to undermine Palestinian rights for 30 years.

The basic problem then, as now, traces back to Washington, which has persistently backed Israel’s rejection of a political settlement in terms of the broad international consensus. Current modifications of US rejectionism are tactical. With plans for an attack on Iraq endangered, the US permitted a UN res-

olution calling for Israeli withdrawal from the newly-invaded territories “without delay” – meaning “as soon as possible”, secretary of state Colin Powell explained at once. Powell’s arrival in Israel was delayed to allow the Israeli Defence Force to continue its destructive operations, facts hard to miss and confirmed by US officials.

When the current intifada broke out, Israel used US helicopters to attack civilian targets, killing and wounding dozens of Palestinians, hardly in self-defence. Clinton responded by arranging “the largest purchase of military helicopters by the Israeli Air Force in a decade” (as reported in Ha’aretz), along with spare parts for Apache attack helicopters. A few weeks later, Israel began to use US helicopters for assassinations. These extended last August to the first assassination of a political leader: Abu Ali Mustafa. That passed in silence, but the reaction was quite different when Israeli cabinet minister Rehavam Ze’evi was killed in retaliation. Bush is now praised for arranging the release of Arafat from his dungeon in return for US-UK supervision of the accused assassins of Ze’evi. It is inconceivable that there should be any effort to punish those responsible for the Mustafa assassination.

Further contributions to “enhancing terror” took place last December, when Washington again vetoed a security council resolution calling for dispatch of international monitors. Ten days earlier, the US boycotted an international conference in Geneva that once again concluded that the fourth Geneva convention applies to the occupied territories, so that many US-Israeli actions there are “grave breaches”, hence serious war crimes. As a “high contracting party”, the US is obligated by solemn treaty to prosecute those responsible for such crimes, including its own leadership. Accordingly, all of this passes in silence.

The US has not officially withdrawn its recognition that the conventions apply to the occupied territories, or its censure of Israeli violations as the “occupying power”. In October 2000

the security council reaffirmed the consensus, “call[ing] on Israel, the occupying power, to abide scrupulously by its legal obligations...” The vote was 14–0. Clinton abstained.

Until such matters are permitted to enter discussion, and their implications understood, it is meaningless to call for “US engagement in the peace process”, and prospects for constructive action will remain grim.