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The Israel-Arafat Agreement

Noam Chomsky

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On August 30, the Israeli Cabinet approved a draft agreement on “Palestinian self-rule” that had been reached by the government of Israel and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat’s personal representatives. Parts of the agreement have not been revealed or are not yet settled at the time of writing (September 2), but it is likely that something much like the published text (NYT, Sept. 1) will be instituted, and that it will be followed by separate agreements between Israel and Arab states.

To understand what has been achieved, it is necessary to recall the relevant background, much of it familiar to readers of this journal, at least.

The June 1967 war brought the superpowers perilously close to confrontation, driving home the importance of a diplomatic settlement. In November 1967, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 242, which expressed a broad international consensus on the general terms for a settlement. The current agreement is based entirely on UN 242 (and 338, which endorses it). Article I of the 1993 draft agreement, outlining the “Aim of the Negotiations,” specifies that “the negotiations on the permanent status will lead to the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338”; no other UN Resolutions are men-

tioned, thus resolving a central issue in the controversy in accord with US-Israeli demands.

UN 242 “emphasiz[es] the inadmissibility of acquisition of territory by war and the need to work for a just and lasting peace in which every state in the area can live in security.” It calls for “Withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict” and “Termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every state in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force.” It calls for an agreement among *states*; Palestinian rights are mentioned only in the call for “a just settlement of the refugee problem,” left unspecified. UN 242 is therefore thoroughly *rejectionist*, if we understand the concept of rejectionism in nonracist terms: as denial of the right to national self-determination of *one or the other* of the two contending parties in the former Palestine.

With varying degrees of ambiguity, UN 242 was accepted by the contending states of the region over the next few years, though their interpretations differed. The Arab states rejected full peace, Israel rejected full withdrawal.

The phrase “withdrawal from territories” has been a particular bone of contention. In most of the world (including Europe), it has been understood to imply Israeli withdrawal from *all* of the territories occupied during the war, with at most minor – and mutual – adjustments. At first, that was also Washington’s interpretation. UN Ambassador Arthur Goldberg informed King Hussein of Jordan that the US insisted that “there must be a mutuality in adjustments,” a classified State Department history observes: to both Israel and the Arab states, “U.S. officials emphasized that any territorial adjustments would be limited in nature and would not, of necessity, be detrimental to the Arab states”; there would be at most “minor reciprocal border rectifications” with no “substantial withdrawing of the

His remarks seem to me apt, and of much broader import, ourselves included.

[pre-war] map.” It was on this understanding, explicitly conveyed by US government mediators, that the Arab states accepted the resolution, and the US itself unequivocally held to this interpretation until 1971. In those years, Israel was alone among major actors in rejecting this interpretation of the document.

The disagreements over interpretation came to a head in February 1971, when UN mediator Gunnar Jarring presented a proposal to Egypt and Israel that called for full peace between them in return for full Israeli withdrawal from Egyptian territory. Egyptian President Sadat accepted the proposal. Sadat’s acceptance of Jarring’s “famous” peace proposal was a “bombshell,” Prime Minister Rabin recalls in his memoirs, a “milestone.” While officially welcoming Egypt’s expression “of its readiness to enter into a peace agreement with Israel,” the government of Israel rejected the agreement, stating that “Israel will not withdraw to the pre-June 5, 1967 lines. The reasoning was explained by Haim Bar-Lev of the governing Labor Party: “I think that we could obtain a peace settlement on the basis of the earlier [pre-June 1967] borders. If I were persuaded that this is the maximum that we might obtain, I would say: agreed. But I think that it is not the maximum. I think that if we continue to hold out, we will obtain more.”

The crucial question was how Washington would react. The Jarring-Sadat agreement was consistent with official US policy. There was, however, a conflict between the State Department and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, who was then engaged in a campaign to undermine and displace Secretary of State Rogers, as he was soon to do. Kissinger insisted that the US must insist upon “stalemate”: no diplomacy, no negotiations. His position prevailed, and Sadat’s peace offer was rejected.

Since 1971, the US and Israel have been virtually alone in rejecting the standard interpretation of the withdrawal clause of UN 242. The basic cause for the misery and suffering that fol-

lowed is their conviction, which has proven to be correct, that “if we continue to hold out, we will obtain more.” The isolation of the US and Israel became still more marked by the mid-1970s, when the terms of the international consensus shifted to include a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, thus departing from earlier rejectionism. In January 1976, the US vetoed a Security Council resolution calling for a settlement in terms of UN 242, with this amendment. The US veto, repeated later, excluded the Security Council from the diplomacy. The General Assembly continued to pass near-unanimous resolutions in similar terms (the US and Israel opposed); a negative US vote amounts to a veto. The US also blocked initiatives from Europe, the Arab states, the PLO and others. The last of the regular UN resolutions was in the midst of the Gulf conflict, in December 1990 (144–2).

Through this period, the US and Israel were the leaders of the rejectionist camp, joined by increasingly marginal elements of the Islamic world, justly termed “extremist.” The conclusions being unacceptable, the facts have been “vetoed” along with numerous peace initiatives, buried deep in the memory hole together with Sadat’s “famous milestone” and much else that is inconvenient.

Israel’s policy spectrum with regard to the occupied territories is illuminated in a study by Peace Now, which compares four different plans for the territories from 1968 to 1992, asking how many Palestinians would be within areas annexed by Israel if these plans were enacted today: (I) the 1968 Allon Plan (Labor); (II) the 1976 Labor Party Settlement Plan (never officially adopted though “it has informed practical decision-making and action”); (III) the Ariel Sharon Plan of 1992 (Likud), which created eleven isolated and discontinuous “cantons” for Palestinian autonomy; (IV) the Defense Establishment Plan of 1992 (Labor), which deals only with the West Bank. The number of Palestinians in settlements to be annexed are as follows:

while the masters observe closely, ready to move if the iron fist is needed. But it might turn out that Palestinian police will treat the population less harshly than the Israeli army and border police, and settler depredations should reduce. Though the agreements say nothing about the matter, there may be a decline in Israeli settlement and in the development programs designed to integrate the extensive areas designated for Jewish settlement into the Israeli economy, leaving Palestinians on the side. Many issues can be debated, but not — at least not seriously — within a doctrinal framework that identifies “realism” as what the US and Israel demand, and dismisses critical analysis in advance as “fanaticism” and “cowardice.”

The respected head of the Palestinian delegation, Haidar Abdul Shafi, had some observations on these matters in a talk in Bethlehem on July 22, 1993, just as Arafat was secretly moving to take matters into his own hands, bypassing local Palestinians. Abdul Shafi held out little hope for the “peace process,” which excludes entirely the possibility “that Palestinians must be the main authority in the interim period for the people and for the land,” leading to true national self-determination. He stressed, however, that

“the negotiations are not worth fighting about. The critical issue is transforming our society. All else is inconsequential... We must decide amongst ourselves to use all our strength and resources to develop our collective leadership and the democratic institutions which will achieve our goals and guide us in the future... The important thing is for us to take care of our internal situation and to organize our society and correct those negative aspects from which it has been suffering for generations and which is the main reason for our losses against our foes.”

signed by its doctrinal institutions becomes the general framework for discussion in most of the world, including Europe.

For Palestinians in refugee camps and elsewhere outside the territories, the agreement offers little hope, and they have expressed understandable bitterness. Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon also “criticized the PLO for making concessions with Israel that could jeopardize Palestinian national rights and undermine the joint Arab negotiating strategy,” Lamis Andoni reported from Amman, giving “Israel the upper hand in imposing its conditions on each Arab country separately.”

A separate matter entirely is whether the two sides would be well-advised to accept the agreement devised by Israel and Arafat. For the US and Israel, the question hardly arises: the agreement falls within the framework on which they have insisted.

For the Palestinians, the question is more complex. The agreement entails abandonment of most of their hopes, at least for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, realistic alternatives may be much worse.

Given US power, refusal to accept US-Israeli terms is at once translated into a demonstration of the worthlessness of such “fanatics” and “cowards,” who thereby cede any rights they might have been thought to have. Palestinians were once “the darling of many Western liberals,” Thomas Friedman writes (meaning, presumably, that some Western liberals regarded them as at least semi-human); but they are beloved no more, and unless they toe the line their former admirers may abandon them to their fate. Furthermore, the agreement should offer Palestinians some relief from the barriers to development imposed by the military administration, no small matter. And it moves beyond Rubinstein’s “autonomy of a POW camp” in that Palestinians are assigned control over “direct taxation.” An Israeli-supervised “strong police force” of Palestinians might, at worst, be the local counterpart of Israel’s South Lebanon Army, subduing the population by terror and threat

1. Allon Plan: 385,000, 91,000 in the West Bank and the rest in Gaza
2. Labor Party Settlement Plan: 603,000, 310,000 in the West Bank
3. Sharon Plan: 393,000, 378,000 in the West Bank
4. Defense Establishment Plan: 204,000 in the West Bank, Gaza unspecified

To these figures must be added the 150,000 Palestinians of East Jerusalem, to be annexed in all plans, the Peace Now study notes. “The Labor Party plan of 1976 would annex the greatest number of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza,” while the Sharon Plan “is the maximalist plan with regard to the West Bank,” though ceding self-rule to more Gaza Palestinians than the Labor plans.

As the analysis indicates, the policy spectrum has been narrow, and invariably rejectionist. The political blocs have differed on West Bank Arab population concentrations, Labor being more concerned than Likud to exclude them from areas scheduled for Israeli takeover. Washington has favored Labor Party rejectionism, more rational than the Likud variety, which has no real provision for the population of the occupied territories except eventual “transfer” (expulsion).

After the Gulf war, Europe accepted the US position that the Monroe Doctrine effectively extends over the Middle East; Europeans would henceforth refrain from independent initiatives, limiting themselves to helping implement US rejectionist doctrine, as Norway indeed did in 1993. The Soviet Union was gone from the scene, its remnants now loyal clients of Washington. The UN had become virtually a US agency. Whatever space the superpower conflict had left for nonalignment was gone, and the catastrophe of capitalism that swept the traditional colonial domains of the West in the 1980s left the Third

World mired in general despair, disciplined by forces of the managed market. With Arab nationalism dealt yet another crushing blow by Saddam's aggression and terror and PLO tactics of more than the usual ineptitude, the Arab rulers had less need than before to respond to popular pressures with pro-Palestinian gestures. The US was therefore in a good position to advance its rejectionist program without interference, moving towards the solution outlined by Secretary of State James Baker well before the Gulf crisis: any settlement must be based on the 1989 plan of the government of Israel, which flatly bars Palestinian national rights (Baker Plan, December 1989).

Washington's general goals have been stable for a long period. The basic concern is the enormous oil wealth of the region. Planning has long been guided by a strategic conception that assigns local management to an "Arab Facade" of weak and dependent dictators, who will ensure that profits from Gulf oil flow primarily to the US (and its British client), not to the people of the region. A network of regional gendarmes is to keep order; local "cops on the beat" as Nixon's Defense Secretary, Melvin Laird, described them in the context of the Nixon Doctrine. The responsibility of the Middle East cops was outlined in 1973 by the Senate's leading expert on the topic, Henry Jackson: to "inhibit and contain those irresponsible and radical elements in certain Arab States...who, were they free to do so, would pose a grave threat indeed to our principal sources of petroleum in the Persian Gulf" — more accurately, to the vast wealth they yield. Senator Jackson was referring specifically to the tacit alliance between Israel, Iran (under the Shah), and Saudi Arabia.

As for Kurds, Palestinians, slum-dwellers in Cairo, and others who contribute nothing to the basic structure of power — they have no rights, by the most elementary principles of statecraft. Perhaps they can occasionally be used in one or another power play, but that is where their rights end, as the history of the Kurds has demonstrated, today once

The draft agreement makes no mention of Palestinian *national* rights, the primary issue on which the US and Israel broke with the international consensus from the mid-1970s. Throughout these years, it was agreed that a settlement should be based on UN 242.

There were two basic points of contention: (1) Do we interpret the withdrawal clause of 242 in accord with the international consensus (including the US, pre-1971), or in accord with the position of Israel and US policy from 1971? (2) Is the settlement based *solely* on UN 242, which offers nothing to the Palestinians, or 242 *and other relevant UN resolutions*, as the PLO had proposed for many years in accord with the non-rejectionist international consensus. Thus, does the settlement incorporate the right of refugees to return or compensation, as the UN has insisted since December 1948 (with US endorsement, long forgotten), and the Palestinian right to national self-determination that has repeatedly been endorsed by the UN (though blocked by Washington)? These are the crucial issues that have stood in the way of a political settlement.

On these issues, the agreement explicitly and without equivocation adopts the US-Israeli stand. As noted, Article I states that the "permanent status will lead to the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338," nothing more. Furthermore, as Beilin made explicit, the withdrawal clause of UN 242 is to be understood in the terms unilaterally imposed by the US (from 1971). In fact, the agreement does not even preclude further Israeli settlement in the large areas of the West Bank it has taken over, or even new land takeovers. On such central matters as control of water, it speaks only of "cooperation" and "equitable utilization" in a manner to be determined by "experts from both sides." The outcome of cooperation between an elephant and a fly is not hard to predict.

The victory of the rejectionists is complete, even in the ideological sphere; given US global power, the version of history de-

The reasons for preferring “confederation” to Palestinian independence have nothing to do with security. As has been understood since 1948, when Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion made the point explicit, an independent Palestinian state serves Israeli security interests better than “a state linked to Transjordan [now Jordan], and maybe tomorrow to Iraq.” The problem is that an independent state would be a barrier to eventual integration of parts of the territories and control of their resources, primarily water. As for “united Jerusalem,” that is a concept of broad and as yet undetermined scope. “Withdrawal from Gaza” and other territories is understood to exclude Jewish settlements and the resources they control. And even this “permanent settlement” lies well down the road.

It is understandable, then, that the Times editors, expressing the prevailing view, should see the “historic deal” as a great opportunity. It is “the Middle East equivalent of the fall of the Berlin wall,” chief diplomatic correspondent Thomas Friedman proclaimed. The projected arrangements represent the “triumph of realism over fanaticism and political courage over political cowardice.” “Realists” understand that in this world, you follow US orders. Those who are not convinced of the justice of traditional US-Israeli rejectionism are not only wrong, but are “fanatics” and “cowards,” thus excluded from respectable society. The hysteria of the rhetoric suggests that more is understood than appears on the surface.

While some Israeli advocates in the US felt that the victory was not far-reaching enough, more perceptive ones recognized the scale of what had been achieved. The PLO had been forced “to become more reasonable,” acceding to Israel’s demands, as Times columnist William Safire, a self-described “pro-Israeli hawk,” put the matter. “Arafat finally appears to be ready to accept [Menahem] Begin’s approach [of 1978], adding the Gaza-Jericho twist,” Safire comments, “having been softened by 15 years of Israeli hard line” — to which we may add US intransigence.

again. The status of the Palestinians has been even lower than that of other worthless people; their value is not zero, but negative, in that their plight has had a disruptive effect in the Arab world, thus interfering with US goals. They must therefore be marginalized somehow, perhaps under a form of “autonomy” that leaves them to manage their own affairs under Israeli supervision. That plan, proposed at Camp David, was taken up when the “peace process” was renewed at Madrid in the Fall of 1991. As the conference opened, one of Israel’s most knowledgeable and acute observers of the territories, journalist Danny Rubinstein, wrote that the US and Israel were proposing “autonomy as in a POW camp, where the prisoners are ‘autonomous’ to cook their meals without interference and to organize cultural events.” Palestinians are to be granted little more control over local services, he wrote, adding that even advocates of Greater Israel never call for literal annexation of the territories, which would require Israel to provide the “restricted services” available to Israel’s second-class Arab citizens, at enormous cost.

As discussed here at the time, the best outcome, from Washington’s point of view, would be a settlement that entrenches the traditional strategic conception and gives it a public form, raising tacit understandings to a formal treaty. If some arrangement for local “autonomy” can suppress the Palestinian issue, well and good. Meanwhile security arrangements among Israel, Turkey, Egypt and the United States can be extended, perhaps bringing others in if they accept the client role. There need be no further concern over possible Soviet support for attempts within the region to interfere with such designs.

While the negotiations were proceeding without issue, Israel stepped up the harsh repression in the territories, following the thinking outlined by Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin (now Prime Minister). In February 1989, he explained to Peace Now leaders that the US had granted Israel time to suppress the Intifada by force, diverting attention by meaningless diplo-

matic maneuvers: “The inhabitants of the territories are subject to harsh military and economic pressure,” Rabin said: “in the end, they will be broken” and will accept Israel’s terms. These policies achieved much success, extended with Rabin’s recent “closure” of the territories, a crushing blow to the staggering Palestinian economy.

From the early days of the Intifada, if not before, it was becoming clear that the PLO leadership was losing its popular support in the occupied territories. Local activists from secular nationalist sectors, while still recognizing the PLO as the sole agent for negotiations, spoke with open contempt of its corruption, personal power plays, opportunism, and disregard for the interests and opinions of the people it claimed to represent.

By all indications, the disaffection increased in the years that followed, while the fundamentalist opposition that Israel had initially nurtured gained popular support, feeding on this growing discontent and on the demoralization as Rabin’s program was implemented, with constant US support at all levels: economic, diplomatic, and ideological.

These matters, reviewed with particular detail and depth in Israel Shahak’s regular reports, have received only sporadic and inadequate coverage here.

With its popular support in decline and its status deteriorating in the Arab world, the PLO became more tolerable to US-Israeli policymakers, particularly as the growing fundamentalist movement evoked memories of the resistance that had driven Israel out of much of Lebanon. Informal Israel-PLO contacts were increasingly reported. These reached their culmination with the August 1993 agreement, which bypassed the delegations engaged in the official “peace process,” and indeed also excluded the PLO, apart from Arafat and a few close associates.

The agreement was welcomed with great acclaim, marred only by skepticism as to whether it could hold. “America’s own greatest interest,” the twin goals of “enhanced security for

Israel and regional peace,” both...seem closer to achievement this morning than ever before,” the New York Times editors observed as the agreement was announced. Apart from omission of the tacit background understanding that the “regional peace” must ensure US control, their identification of Washington’s highest priorities is accurate, though automatic identification of US government policy with “America’s greatest interest” takes a leap of faith; it is not obvious that ignoring Palestinian national rights and the security of others is in the interest of the people of the United States.

The editors may, however, be right in thinking that long-standing US policy goals have been advanced. The intended eventual outcome of the 1993 agreement falls well within the bounds of traditional US-Israeli rejectionism, adopting essential features of the Sharon Plan as well as the Labor Party’s Allon Plan. That much was spelled out the same day on the facing page of the Times by Israel’s Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin, a close associate of Foreign Minister Shimon Peres. He informed his US audience that

“the permanent solution will be based on Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and from most of the West Bank. We agree to a confederated formula between Jordan and the Palestinians in the West Bank, but we will not return to pre-1967 borders. United Jerusalem will remain the capital of the State of Israel.”

In return, “After years of rejection of Israel as part of the Middle East, the Arabs will accept and recognize Israel’s right to exist as a sovereign state within secure and defined borders in this region” — as they did, for example, in the vetoed Security Council resolution of January 1976, gone from history along with much else like it, so that Beilin’s statement will ring true to American ears.