

Apocalypse Near

*Noam Chomsky
interviewed by
Merav Yudilovitch*

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You say the provocation and counter-provocation all serve as a distraction from the real issue. Is the war in Lebanon also a distraction that aims to draw the world's attention to the north of Israel while Gaza is been destroyed?

I assume you are referring to John Berger's letter (see page 10). The 'real issue' that is being ignored is the systematic destruction of any prospects for a viable Palestinian existence as Israel annexes valuable land and major resources (water particularly), leaving the shrinking territories assigned to Palestinians as unviable cantons, largely separated from one another and from whatever little bit of Jerusalem is to be left to Palestinians, and completely imprisoned as Israel takes over the Jordan valley (and of course controls air space, etc.). This programme of '*hitkansut*', cynically disguised as 'withdrawal', is of course completely illegal, in violation of Security Council resolutions and the unanimous decision of the World Court (including the dissenting statement of US Justice Buerenthal). If it is implemented as planned, it spells the end of the very broad international consensus on a two-state settlement that the United States and Israel have unilaterally blocked for 30 years, matters that are so well documented that I do not have to review them here.

The United States and Israel do not tolerate any resistance to these plans, preferring to pretend, falsely of course, that 'there is no partner', as they proceed with programmes that go back a long way. We may recall that Gaza and the West Bank are recognised to be a unit, so that if resistance to Israel's destructive and illegal programmes is considered to be legitimate within the West Bank, then it is legitimate in Gaza as well, in reaction to Israeli actions in the West Bank.

To turn to your specific question, even a casual look at the Western press reveals that the

crucial developments in the occupied territories are marginalised even more by the war in Lebanon. The ongoing destruction in Gaza, which was rarely seriously reported in the first place, has largely faded into the background, and the systematic takeover of the West Bank has virtually disappeared. The severe punishment of the population for ‘voting the wrong way’ was never considered problematic, consistent with the long-standing principle that democracy is fine if and only if it accords with strategic and economic interests, documented to the heavens. However, I would not go as far as the implication in your question that this was a purpose of the war, though it clearly is the effect.

Do you see the world media partially responsible for not insisting on linking what's going on in the occupied territories and Lebanon?

Yes, but that is the least of the charges that should be levelled against the world media, and the intellectual communities generally. One of many far more severe charges is brought up in the opening paragraph of the Berger letter. Recall the facts. On 25 June, Corporal Gilad Shalit was captured at an army post near Gaza, eliciting huge cries of outrage worldwide, continuing daily at a high pitch, and a sharp escalation in Israeli attacks in Gaza. The escalation was supported on the grounds that capture of a soldier is a grave crime for which the population must be punished. One day before, on 24 June, Israeli forces kidnapped two Gaza civilians, Osama and Mustafa Muamar, by any standards a far more severe crime than capture of a soldier. The Muamar kidnappings were certainly known to the major world media. They were reported at once in the English-language Israeli press (*Jerusalem Post*, *Ha'aretz* English edition, 25 June), basically Israeli Defence Force handouts. And there were indeed a few brief, scattered and dismissive reports in several newspapers around the United States; the only serious news report in English that day was in the Turkish press. Very revealingly, there was no comment, no follow-up, no call for military or terrorist attacks against Israel. A Google search will quickly reveal the relative significance in the West of the kidnapping of civilians by the Israeli Defence Force and the capture of an Israeli soldier a day later.

The paired events, a day apart, demonstrate with bitter clarity that the show of outrage over the Shalit kidnapping was cynical fraud. They reveal that by Western moral standards, kidnapping of civilians is just fine if it is done by ‘our side’, but capture of a soldier on ‘our side’ a day later is a despicable crime that requires severe punishment of the population. As Gideon Levy accurately wrote in *Ha'aretz*, the Israeli Defence Force kidnapping of civilians the day before the capture of Cpl. Shalit strips away any ‘legitimate basis for the IDF’s operation’, and, we may add, any legitimate basis for support for these operations. The same assessment carries over to the July 12 kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers near the Lebanon border, heightened, in this case, by the (null) reaction to the regular Israeli practice for many years of abducting Lebanese and holding many as hostages for long periods, and of course killing many Lebanese. No one ever argued that these crimes justified bombing and shelling of Israel, invasion and

destruction of much of the country, or terrorist actions within it. The conclusions are stark, clear, and entirely unambiguous.

All of this is, obviously, of extraordinary importance in the present case, particularly given the dramatic timing. That is, I suppose, why the major media chose to avoid the crucial facts, apart from a very few scattered and dismissive phrases.

Apologists for state crimes claim that the kidnapping of the Gaza civilians is justified by Israeli Defence Force claims that they are ' Hamas militants ' or were planning crimes. By their logic, they should therefore be lauding the capture of Gilad Shalit, a soldier in an army that was (uncontroversially) shelling and bombing Gaza. These performances are truly disgraceful.

You're talking first and foremost about acknowledging the Palestinian nation but will it solve the 'Iranian threat', will it push the Hezbollah from the Israeli border? Today, Israelis see an immediate danger on the northern front. Are we being blinded?

Virtually all informed observers agree that a fair and equitable resolution of the plight of the Palestinians would considerably weaken the anger and hatred towards Israel and the United States in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Such an agreement is surely within reach, if the United States and Israel depart from their long-standing rejectionism. Before they were called off prematurely by Ehud Barak, the Taba negotiations of January 2001 were coming close to a viable settlement, carried forward by subsequent negotiations, most prominently the Geneva Accord released in December 2002, which received strong international support but was dismissed by the United States and rejected by Israel. One can raise various criticisms of these proposals, but they are at least a basis, perhaps a solid basis, for progress towards peaceful settlement if the United States and Israel sharply reverse their rejectionist policies.

On Iran and Hezbollah, there is, of course, much more to say, and I can only mention a few central points here.

Let us begin with Iran. In 2003, Iran offered to negotiate all outstanding issues with the United States, including nuclear issues and a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The offer was made by the moderate Khatami government, with the support of the hard-line 'supreme leader' Ayatollah Khamenei. The Bush administration response was to censure the Swiss diplomat who brought the offer.

In June 2006, Khamenei issued an official declaration stating that Iran agrees with the Arab countries on the issue of Palestine, meaning that it accepts the 2002 Arab League call for full normalisation of relations with Israel in a two-state settlement in accord with the international consensus. The timing suggests that this might have been a reprimand to his subordinate Ahmadinejad, whose inflammatory statements are given wide publicity in the West, unlike the far more important declaration by his superior Khamenei. Just a few days ago, former Iranian diplomat Saddagh Kharazzi 'reaffirmed that Iran would back a two-state

solution if the Palestinians accepted' (*Financial Times*, 26 July 2006). Of course, the Palestine Liberation Organisation has officially backed a two-state solution for many years, and backed the 2002 Arab League proposal. Hamas has also indicated its willingness to negotiate a two-state settlement, as is surely well-known in Israel. Kharazzi is reported to be the author of the 2003 proposal of Khatami and Khamenei.

The United States and Israel do not want to hear any of this. They prefer to hear that Iran 'is sworn to the destruction of the Jewish state' (Jerusalem correspondent Charles Radin, *Boston Globe*, 2 August), the standard and more convenient story.

They also do not want to hear that Iran appears to be the only country to have accepted the proposal by International Atomic Energy Agency director Mohammed ElBaradei that all weapons-usable fissile materials be placed under international control, a step towards a verifiable Fissile Materials Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), as mandated by the UN General Assembly in 1993.

ElBaradei's proposal, if implemented, would not only end the Iranian nuclear crisis, but would also deal with a vastly more serious crisis: the growing threat of nuclear war, which leads prominent strategic analysts to warn of 'apocalypse soon' (Robert McNamara) if policies continue on their current course. The United States strongly opposes a verifiable Fissile Materials Cut-off Treaty, but over US objections, the treaty came to a vote at the United Nations, where it passed 147-1, with two abstentions: Israel, which cannot oppose its patron, and more interestingly, Blair's Britain, which retains a degree of sovereignty. The British ambassador stated that Britain supports the treaty, but it 'divides the international community' 147 to 1. These again are matters that are virtually suppressed outside of specialist circles, and are matters of literal survival of the species, extending far beyond Iran.

It is commonly said that the 'international community' has called on Iran to abandon its legal right to enrich uranium. That is true, if we define the 'international community' as Washington and whoever happens to go along with it. It is surely not true of the world. The non-aligned countries have forcefully endorsed Iran's 'inalienable right' to enrich uranium. And, rather remarkably, in Turkey, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, a majority of the population favour accepting a nuclear-armed Iran over any American military action, international polls reveal.

The non-aligned countries also called for a nuclear-free Middle East, a longstanding demand of the authentic international community, again blocked by the United States and Israel. It should be recognised that the threat of Israeli nuclear weapons is taken very seriously in the world. As explained by the former Commander-in-Chief of the US Strategic Command, General Lee Butler, 'it is dangerous in the extreme that in the cauldron of animosities that we call the Middle East, one nation has armed itself, ostensibly, with stockpiles of nuclear weapons, perhaps numbering in the hundreds, and that inspires other nations to do so'. Israel is doing itself no favours if it ignores these concerns.

It is also of some interest that when Iran was ruled by the tyrant installed by a US-UK military coup, the United States – including Rumsfeld, Cheney, Kissinger, Wolfowitz and others – strongly supported the Iranian nuclear programmes they

now condemn and helped provide Iran with the means to pursue them. These facts are surely not lost on the Iranians, just as they have not forgotten the very strong support of the United States and its allies for Saddam Hussein during his murderous aggression, including help in developing the chemical weapons that helped kill hundreds of thousands of Iranians.

There is a great deal more to say, but it appears that the 'Iranian threat' to which you refer can be approached by peaceful means, if the United States and Israel would agree. We cannot know whether the Iranian proposals are serious, unless they are explored. The US-Israel refusal to explore them, and the silence of the United States (and, to my knowledge, European) media, suggests that it is perhaps feared that they may be serious.

I should add that to the outside world, it sounds a bit odd, to put it mildly, for the United States and Israel to be warning of the 'Iranian threat' when they and they alone are issuing threats to launch an attack, threats that are immediate and credible, and in serious violation of international law; and are preparing very openly for such an attack. Whatever one thinks of Iran, no such charge can be made in their case. It is also apparent to the world, if not to the United States and Israel, that Iran has not invaded any other countries, something that the United States and Israel have done regularly.

On Hezbollah too, there are hard and serious questions. As is well-known, Hezbollah was formed in reaction to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and its harsh and brutal occupation in violation of Security Council orders. Hezbollah won considerable prestige by playing the leading role in driving out the aggressors. Also, like other Islamic movements, including Hamas, it has gained popular support by providing social services to the poor. Along with Amal, now its close ally, Hezbollah represents the Shi'a community in the parliament in Lebanon's confessional system. It is an integral part of Lebanese society. And much as in the past, US-backed Israeli violence is sharply increasing popular support for Hezbollah, not only in the Arab and Muslim worlds generally, but also in Lebanon itself. Polls taken in late July reveal that 87 per cent of Lebanese support Hezbollah's fight with Israel, a rise of 29 per cent on a similar poll conducted in February. More striking, however, is the level of support for Hezbollah's resistance from non-Shiite communities. Eighty per cent of Christians polled supported Hezbollah along with 80 percent of Druze and 89 percent of Sunnis. 'Lebanese no longer blame Hezbollah for sparking the war by kidnapping the Israeli soldiers, but Israel and the United States instead' (Christian Science Monitor, 28 July 2006). As often in the past, Israel is doing itself no favours by failing to attend to the predictable consequences of its resort to extreme violence instead of such measures as prisoner exchange, as in the past.

It is also not wise to ignore the recent observations of Zeev Maoz (*Ha'aretz*, 24 July). As he wrote, the 'wall-to-wall consensus in Israel that the war against the Hezbollah in Lebanon is a just and moral war is based on selective and short-term memory, on an introverted world view, and on double standards'. The reasons include the Israeli practice of kidnapping and the almost daily violations of the

Lebanese border for surveillance: 'a border violation is a border violation'. The reasons also include the historical record: the four earlier Israeli invasions since 1978, and their grim consequences for Lebanese. And we should also not forget the pretexts. The 1982 invasion was carried out after a year in which Israel repeatedly carried out bombing and other provocations in Lebanon, apparently trying to elicit some PLO violation of the 1981 truce, and when it failed, attacked anyway, on the pretext of the assassination attempt against Ambassador Argov (by Abu Nidal, who was at war with the Palestine Liberation Organisation). The invasion was clearly intended, as virtually conceded, to end the embarrassing PLO initiatives for negotiation, a 'veritable catastrophe' for Israel as Yehoshua Porat pointed out. It was, as described at the time, a 'war for the West Bank'.

The later invasions also had shameful pretexts. In 1993, Hezbollah had violated 'the rules of the game', Yitzhak Rabin announced: these Israeli rules permitted Israel to carry out terrorist attacks north of its illegally-held 'security zone', but did not permit retaliation within Israel. Peres' 1996 invasion had no more credible pretexts. It is convenient to forget all of this, or to concoct tales about shelling of the Galilee in 1981, but it is not an attractive practice, nor a wise one.

The problem of Hezbollah's arms is quite serious, no doubt. Resolution 1559 calls for disarming of all Lebanese militias, but Lebanon has not enacted that provision. Sunni Prime Minister Fouad Siniora describes Hezbollah's military wing as 'resistance rather than as a militia, and thus exempt from' Resolution 1559. A National Dialogue in June 2006 failed to resolve the problem. Its main purpose was to formulate a 'national defence strategy' (*vis-à-vis* Israel), but it remained deadlocked over Hezbollah's call for 'a defense strategy that allowed the Islamic Resistance to keep its weapons as a deterrent to possible Israeli aggression' (Beirut-based journalist Jim Quilty, *Middle East Report*, July 25), in the absence of any credible alternative. The United States could, if it chose, provide a credible guarantee against an invasion by its client state, but that would require a sharp change in long-standing policy.

In the background are crucial facts emphasised by several veteran Middle East correspondents. Rami Khouri, an editor of Lebanon's *Daily Star*, writes that 'the Lebanese and Palestinians have responded to Israel's persistent and increasingly savage attacks against entire civilian populations by creating parallel or alternative leaderships that can protect them and deliver essential services'. Syria specialist Patrick Seale agrees: 'You have the rise of essentially non-state actors like Hezbollah and Hamas because of the vacuum created by the impotence of Arab states to contain or deter Israel. These actors are basically taking issue with Israel's "deterrence", which posits that Israel can strike but no one can strike at it'. Until such basic questions are dealt with, it is likely that 'the Middle East will sink further into violence and despair', as Khouri predicts.

You are not referring in your letter to the Israeli casualties. Is there differentiation in your opinion between Israeli casualties of war (and I'm not talking about soldiers, I'm talking about civilians) and Lebanese or Palestinian casualties?

That is not accurate. John Berger's letter is very explicit about making no distinction between Israeli and other casualties. As his letter states: 'Both categories of missile rip bodies apart horribly – who but field commanders can forget this for a moment'.

Why, in your opinion, is the world co-operating with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and why isn't there any real pressure on the Israeli government to stop the madness in Gaza and Jenin? What purpose does this silence serve?

The great majority of the world protests, but chooses not to act. Europe is unwilling to take a stand against the United States administration, which has made it clear that it supports Israeli policies in Palestine and Lebanon. The rest of the world strongly objects, but they are not even considered part of the 'international community', unless they obey. The US-backed Arab tyrannies at first condemned Hezbollah, but were forced to back down out of fear of their own populations. Even King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, Washington's most loyal (and most important) ally, was compelled to say that 'If the peace option is rejected due to the Israeli arrogance, then only the war option remains, and no one knows the repercussions befalling the region, including wars and conflict that will spare no one, including those whose military power is now tempting them to play with fire'.

With regard to Palestine, while Bush's stand is extreme, it has its roots in earlier policies. The week in Taba in January 2001 is the only real break in US rejectionism in 30 years. During the Oslo years, the US-Israel hinted at joining the international consensus, but made sure it would be very difficult to implement by steady increase in settlement, the rate peaking in 2000. The United States also strongly supported earlier Israeli invasions of Lebanon, though, in 1982 and 1996, it compelled Israel to terminate its aggression when atrocities were reaching a point that harmed US interests.

Unfortunately, one can generalise a comment of Uri Avnery's about Dan Halutz, who 'views the world below through a bombsight'. Much the same is true of Rumsfeld-Cheney-Rice, and other top Bush administration planners, despite occasional soothing rhetoric. As history reveals, that view of the world is not uncommon among those who hold a virtual monopoly of the means of violence, with consequences that we need not review.

What is the next chapter in this Middle-Eastern conflict as you see it?

I do not know of anyone foolhardy enough to predict. The United States and Israel are stirring up popular forces that are very ominous, and which will only gain in power and become more extremist if the US and Israel persist in demolishing any hope of realisation of Palestinian national rights, and destroying Lebanon. It should also be recognised that Washington's primary concern, as in the past, is not Israel and Lebanon, but the vast energy resources of the Middle East, recognised

60 years ago to be a ‘stupendous source of strategic power’ and ‘one of the greatest material prizes in world history’. We can expect, with confidence, that the United States will continue to do what it can to control this unparalleled source of strategic power. That may not be easy. The remarkable incompetence of Bush planners has created a catastrophe in Iraq, for their own interests as well. They are even facing the possibility of the ultimate nightmare: a loose Shi’a alliance (including Shi’ite-dominated Iraq, Iran, and the Shi’ite regions of Saudi Arabia), controlling the world’s major energy supplies, and independent of Washington or even worse, establishing closer links with the China-based Asian Energy Security Grid and Shanghai Cooperation Council. The results could be truly apocalyptic. And even in tiny Lebanon, the leading Lebanese academic scholar of Hezbollah, and a harsh critic of the organisation, describes the current conflict in ‘apocalyptic terms’, warning that possibly ‘All hell would be let loose’ if the outcome of the US-Israel campaign leaves a situation in which ‘the Shiite community is seething with resentment at Israel, the United States and the government that it perceives as its betrayer’ (Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, *Washington Post*, 23 July).

It is no secret that in past years, Israel has helped to destroy secular Arab nationalism and to create Hezbollah and Hamas, just as US violence has expedited the rise of extremist Islamic fundamentalism and jihadi terror. The reasons are understood. There are constant warnings about it by Western (including US) intelligence agencies, and by the leading specialists on these topics. One can bury one’s head in the sand and take comfort in a ‘wall-to-wall consensus’ that what we do is ‘just and moral’ (Maaz), ignoring the lessons of recent history, or simple rationality. Or one can face the facts, and approach dilemmas which are very serious by peaceful means. They are available. Their success can never be guaranteed. But we can be reasonably confident that viewing the world through a bombsight will bring further misery and suffering, perhaps even ‘apocalypse soon’.

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