

The US and Israel

Noam Chomsky

On 10 November 2009, a telephone interview with Professor Chomsky was conducted before live audiences at three locations in Edinburgh and Glasgow. The events were sponsored by Radio Ramadan Edinburgh, Scotland Against Criminalising Communities, and the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign. The questions are in italics, and Professor Chomsky's replies in ordinary type.

(Interviewer in Glasgow): Professor Avi Shlaim came to Edinburgh and ridiculed the idea that Israel was a strategic asset to the US. Would you comment on this?

CHOMSKY (in Boston, USA): There are two questions here. Is Israel perceived as a strategic asset? Is the perception accurate?

Yes, it is perceived as a strategic asset. Whether the judgment is correct is a separate matter, which I'll put aside. But is it perceived that way, yes, quite definitely. Israel is perceived as a strategic asset but that has changed over the years.

1967: Israel's victory was considered a very great benefit to the United States. It eliminated Washington's main enemy in the region – secular nationalism – represented particularly by Abdel Nasser. He was destroyed. Secular nationalism was more or less destroyed. The main US allies – the radical Islamist Saudi Arabia – were protected. They had been virtually at war with Nasser's Egypt. US aid (to Israel) increased at this time and in the next administration Israel was identified as 'one of the cops on the beat'.

They had a strategic concept on how to control the region. There were the oil producers who were the primary concern. But they had to be protected even from their own people and from radical nationalist forces. They needed 'cops on the beat' who would protect them. There was a network of them. There was Iran under the Shah, Turkey, non-Arab Pakistan, and Israel joined the club.

In 1970, there was a Palestinian uprising in Jordan; there was a real concern in Washington that Palestinians may even take

over Jordan. They regarded this as a serious threat to their oil-producing allies. The Jordanian army was crushing the Palestinians in 'Black September'. It appeared as if Syria might intervene on behalf of the Palestinians. That was regarded as a serious threat to the Hashemite Monarchy there – Washington's ally. The US couldn't do anything about it because they were bogged down in South East Asia. They arranged with Israel to mobilize and threaten Syria. And they did, and Syria backed off. US aid to Israel quadrupled after that. US intelligence reports at the time pretty much described what I just said.

A framework of control of the oil producing regions was established with a tacit alliance between Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia, the main producer. Iran and Israel are essentially protectors of the Saudi Monarchy. It proceeds from there. In 1979, the Shah fell. Israel's role increased and was even more important. At that time Israel was performing many secondary services for the US. It was enabling Washington to evade congressional sanctions on providing direct military support for very abusive states where aid was blocked from Congress. They were able to get around it. Israel was the intermediary, one of several.

And so it continues. Israel is not just regarded as a strategic asset, it's regarded as a major opportunity for investment. So high-tech investment in Israel is increasing significantly. One example of many is the Intel corporation, the major producer of chips in the world. It is developing a new generation of chips which they think will become the global standard, and their major factory is in Israel. Military and intelligence are very close in all kinds of ways. In fact the US even uses Israel to pre-position weapons. Israel stands as a rich, developed, Western advanced economy, rather like the US in many ways. It has a highly educated, high-tech sector of workers and a powerful military force. Right on the fringe of the world's most strategic areas. It's kind of like a US military base and intelligence centre with very close military intelligence and economic relations, especially in high-tech industry. Well, that's a strategic asset.

There's a negative, downside. It causes anger and resentment among the Arab populations. But that's an old story. In the 1950s, Eisenhower raised the question: why is there a campaign of hatred against us in the Arab world, the people, not among the states, which are very friendly? Eisenhower had just forced England, France and Israel out of the Sinai so you'd expect sympathy and support, but instead you had a campaign of hatred. There was no Israel issue at that point. The National Security Council, the highest security body in the United States, pointed out that there's a perception in the Arab world that the US supports harsh and

oppressive regimes, and blocks democracy and development. And it does so because we want to gain control over their resources. It went on to say that this perception is pretty much accurate, and in fact that's what we should do. If there's a campaign of hatred, then we count on the dictatorial governments to oppress them. This was before Israel was an issue.

What about the opinion that American foreign policy isn't dictated by Israel being a strategic asset, but because of the powers of the pro-Israeli/Zionist Lobby in the USA?

CHOMSKY: The Lobby is influential, but it is by no means one of the most powerful lobbies. It's utterly dwarfed by the business lobbies; so the Chamber of Commerce, one of many, is huge in comparison to the Israeli Lobby. The Israeli Lobby is just a peanut in comparison. But it has some influence. To determine its influence you have to look at cases where Israeli interests and US government interests conflict. There's no point looking at points where their interests more or less coincide because that doesn't tell you anything.

Eisenhower threw Israel out of the Sinai. Israel didn't like it at all; Israel made a little bit of noise but they basically retreated. And that's what happens consistently. In cases where there is conflict, the Israeli Lobby fades in to the background.

During summer 2008, under the very pro-Israel George Bush, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the main Jewish Lobby, tried to press a Congressional Resolution that called for a blockade of Iran, which is essentially an act of war. They were getting a lot of supporters in Congress. This was right in the middle of the election campaigns, the most sensitive period, and then it frittered away. It stopped. Apparently it stopped because they got a word from the White House that 'No, we don't want this. We don't want Israel to drive us in to war.'

So the lobby disappeared. The initiative died. That's a recent case, and there are many other such cases.

Israel's economy is heavily based on high tech military exports and has a huge potential market in China. But the United States doesn't like that, and repeatedly in 2000 and 2005 the US had simply ordered them not to export those high-tech goods to China. Israel didn't like it at all; but they have to follow US orders. The lobby didn't raise a peep, and thought it better not to confront US power. In 2005, the Bush Administration not only ordered Israel not to do it, but they went out of their way to humiliate Israel, insisting that Israel provide an apology for its effort to do this, and

refused its counterpart officials admittance to this country and so on. They insisted on dragging them through the mud, and Israel had to obey and the lobby was quiet.

In fact one particularly interesting case was in January 2001, Clinton's last month in office. That's the one time in the last 30 years when a US President has been willing to tolerate consideration of the very broad international consensus on a Two State political settlement. The US has blocked it for 30 years. But in Clinton's last term he indicated that it was acceptable, it fell within what he called his parameters. As he pointed out in January, Israel and the Palestinians had both agreed to these parameters, both had expressed reservations, and they met in Taba, Egypt to try and iron out their differences. And they came pretty close to a settlement. In fact in their last press conference they said if they had a little more time they could have settled all their issues; pretty much along the terms of the international consensus.

Israel called off the negotiations prematurely so this never happened. Relevant to the lobby, what's interesting is that there was not a word from them. They didn't object. If the US government says they have to go for diplomatic settlement then they keep quiet.

On issues that don't concern the US, such as punishing the Palestinians, they get their way. But on issues that relate to US power, they have fairly limited influence. The other lobbies have influence, too. Take for instance the Armenian lobby, which is by no means a huge lobby, but nevertheless they're powerful enough. Just a year ago they came pretty close to seriously harming US relations with Turkey; bringing up issues about the Armenian Genocide. They finally backed off but it was very close. But yes, they had influence. The Israeli lobby is much bigger and has more influence. But I think if you look closely you find pretty much what I described. On matters of little significance to US power they get their way, on matters of significance to US power they back off.

The Bush nightmare has gone. What awaits us from President Obama?

CHOMSKY: I can't understand why anyone had any great expectations of him. I mean even before the Primaries it was clear from looking at his website that he intended to maintain the extreme rejectionist position of the US; that is opposition to the political settlement lines of the international consensus, and so it has continued.

He's made one major speech about the issue when he introduced George Mitchell as his negotiator. He tried conciliatory rhetoric, he said there's a

constructive position on the table, namely the proposal of the Arab League, a peace proposal more or less in line with international consensus. He said we should take that seriously. The Arab League proposal goes beyond the international consensus. After the Two State settlement is established, the Arab states should proceed towards normalization in relations with Israel.

Obama said yes, they ought to proceed to normalization towards Israel. He's an intelligent person and he knows perfectly well that's not what the proposal was. That was a corollary to the proposal; the proposal was that there should be a Two State settlement according to international consensus, and in that context the Arab states should proceed with normalization. He very carefully omitted the content and said the Arab states should proceed with normalization. In fact that's his position ever since. That's a clear way of saying he continues to sustain an opposition to the Two State settlement of any meaningful sort.

There's supposed to be a controversy between the US and Israel over Obama's call for an end to expanding settlements. Obama's statement that Israel should not expand the settlements is just quoting George Bush. In fact he used the wording of the so-called 'road map'. But he also indicated clearly to Netanyahu that he should not take it seriously. Administration officials made it clear that they did not intend to use any of the methods George Bush first used. He imposed very mild sanctions on Israeli settlements. And the answer was 'No, this is purely symbolic, we're not going to do anything like sanctions.'

That's a way of telling Netanyahu 'Just ignore what I'm saying. Expand settlements as much as you like.'

Hilary Clinton praised Israel for expanding settlements in ways that are unprecedented because they're not doing it too much. That's just ridiculous. That's just a way of saying continue the rejectionist policies.

The whole issue of expanding settlements is a side issue. The issue is not expansion of the settlements but their existence as part of Israel, which Obama continues to support diplomatically, militarily and ideologically. And it goes on like that.

Just to give you one last example. Amidst all the furore about Iran and its concealing nuclear weapons maybe, right in the middle of that, the International Atomic Energy Agency considered a resolution calling on Israel to open up its nuclear facilities to inspection and join the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The US and Europe opposed the resolution and tried to block it, but they failed. Then the US and Europe voted against the resolution, but it passed anyway. Then Obama immediately informed Israel that it's not going apply to them.