

Voyage to Diyarbakir

Noam Chomsky

Noam Chomsky is Professor of Linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He visited the Kurdish city of Diyarbakir in south-eastern Turkey in February 2002. His speech there was followed by questions from the audience, which appear in italic text.

If I can open with just a personal remark of my own, it is a very moving experience for me to be here. I have followed as best I can the noble and tragic history of the Kurds in Turkey in past years from everything I can find, particularly in the last ten years. But it is quite different to see the actual faces of the people who are resisting and who continue to struggle for freedom and justice.

I have been asked repeatedly to express my opinion about the rights of people to use their mother tongue. As a linguist I have no opinion about the matter. As a human being there is nothing to discuss. It is too obvious. The right to use one's mother tongue freely in every way that one wants – in literature, in public meetings, in any other form – that is a primary essential human right. There is nothing further to say about it.

The campaign of the past weeks of the students, mothers, fathers to petition for the right to have elective courses in one's own language is again simply affirming an elementary human right that should not even be under discussion. One can only admire the courage of people who are pressing this campaign in the face of repression and adversity.

Beyond the matter of cultural rights, which are beyond discussion, obvious rights, there lies the world of difficult, intricate questions of political rights. These issues are arising all over the world.

One of the healthy developments now taking place in Europe is the erosion of the nation-state system with increasing regionalisation. In areas from Catalonia to Scotland, there is a revival of traditional languages, cultures, customs and a degree of political autonomy leading towards what may become – and I think should become – an arrangement of regional areas that are essentially autonomous within a federal framework. In fact something like the old Ottoman empire. There was a lot wrong

with the Ottoman empire, but some things about it were basically correct: mainly, the fact that it left a high degree of regional autonomy and independence within a framework, which unfortunately was autocratic and corrupt and brutal, but we can eliminate that part, and the positive aspects of the Ottoman empire probably ought to be reconstructed in some fashion.

And within that kind of framework, which I hope will be evolving, one can, I think, look forward to an autonomous Kurdistan, which can bring together the Kurds of the region, the tens of millions of Kurds of the region, into a self-governing, autonomous, culturally independent, politically active region, as part of a broader federation of – one hopes – friendly and co-operating national and ethnic and cultural groups.

The next question that arises has to do with the methods of struggle to achieve such ends. Here the primary question is whether these methods should be violent or non-violent. Here we have to distinguish two kinds of questions: moral questions and tactical questions. With regard to the moral questions, my own personal view is that a very heavy burden of proof is required for anyone who advocates or undertakes the use of violence. In my view that burden of proof can very rarely be met. Non-violent protest is more appropriate morally, and tactically as well. However, there is a fundamental principle of non-violence: ‘you do not preach non-violence unless you are willing to stand alongside the people who are suffering the repression.’ Otherwise, you can’t give that advice. I’m not in a position to stand next to the people who are suffering repression, so I can only express my opinion, but not give advice.

It’s a characteristic of history for oppression to lead to resistance and for resistance often to turn to violent resistance. If it does, that resistance is invariably called terrorism. That is true for everyone, even the world’s worst mass murderers. So the Nazis for example described what they were doing in Europe as defending the population against the terrorism of the partisans. In their eyes, they were defending the legitimate government of France against the terrorist partisans who were directed from abroad. The same with the Japanese in Manchuria. They were defending the population from the terrorism of Chinese bandits. Propaganda, no matter how vulgar, always has to have some element of truth in it, if it is to be credible at all. And even in the case of the worst mass murderers like the Nazis or Japanese invaders there was an element of truth to their claims. In some perverse sense their claims were legitimate, and the same can be said about the claims made by others: the United States, Turkey and other countries, who claim to be defending the population against terrorism.

With regard to the concept of terrorism there are really two notions: one is the notion ‘terror,’ another is the notion ‘counter-terror.’ If you look in, for example, US Army manuals, they define ‘terror’ and they define ‘counter-terror.’ And the interesting thing about the definitions is they are virtually identical. Terrorism turns out to be about the same as counter-terrorism. The main difference is who is the agent of the terrorist violence. If it’s someone we don’t like, it is terrorism. If it’s someone we do like, including ourselves, it is counter-terrorism. But apart

from that the definitions of the actions are about the same.

Another important difference between terrorism and counter-terrorism is that what is called 'counter-terrorism' is usually carried out by states. It's the terrorism carried out by states. And states have resources that enable them to be far more violent and destructive than private terrorists. So the end result is that the terrorism of states far outweighs that of any other entity in the world. We constantly read that terrorism is the weapon of the weak. That is totally false, the exact opposite of truth. Like any other weapon, terrorism is used much more effectively by the strong, and in particular by more powerful states which are the leaders in terrorism throughout the world, except that they call it 'counter-terrorism.'

Now we hear every day that there is a 'war on terrorism' that has been declared by the most powerful states. In fact that war is re-declared. It was declared in 1981, twenty years ago. When the Reagan administration came into office, it declared that the focus of US foreign policy would be state-sponsored international terrorism, the plague of the modern age; they declared that they would drive the evil out of the world. The war has been re-declared with the same rhetoric, and mostly by the same people. Among the leaders of the first 'war against terror' twenty years ago are the ones who are directing the current 'war against terror,' with the same rhetoric and very likely with the same consequences.

The focus of the first war on terrorism was Central America and the Middle East. And both of those regions were scenes of massive terrorism in the 1980s, the major part of it, by far, conducted by the US and its clients and allies, on a scale with few recent precedents in those regions. There is no time to go through the details, but in the Middle East for example, the most extreme terrorist act by far was the Israeli invasion of Lebanon – supported, armed, backed by the United States – which killed about 20,000 people for political ends. There wasn't any pretence. It was openly recognised in Israel to be a war to promote the US-Israeli policy of assuring effective control over the Israeli-occupied territories. And that's only one example of the terrorism in the region that was either carried out directly or decisively supported by the US, exceeding other cases by a substantial margin.

In Central America, the Reagan administration at first attempted to follow the model of John F. Kennedy in South Vietnam, which would have meant attacking Central America directly, using chemical warfare and napalm, bombing with B52s, and invading with American troops. But they had to draw back from that intention, because the population of the US had become considerably more civilised in the twenty years that intervened, through activism, protest, and organisation. Therefore the Reagan administration had to withdraw from direct outright aggression as in South Vietnam, and instead turned to international terrorism. They created the most extraordinary international terrorist network that the world had ever seen. When a country like Libya wants to conduct a terrorist act, they hire an individual like Carlos the Jackal. When a big powerful

state like the US wants to carry out international terrorism, it hires terrorist states: Taiwan, Israel, Argentina under the neo-Nazi generals, Britain, Saudi Arabia. Other terrorist states carry out most of the work, along with local agents. The US supplies the funding and the training and the overall direction. The effects were horrendous: hundreds of thousands of people killed, every imaginable kind of torture, everything you know about from South-eastern Turkey in the past ten years. And it finally succeeded in crushing popular resistance. There was also a kind of ‘clash of civilisations’ involved, to borrow a currently-fashionable phrase: the US was fighting against the Catholic Church. The Church had made a grave error: it had adopted a ‘preferential option for the poor,’ a commitment to work for the benefit of poor people, the vast majority. That was unacceptable. The war was to a large extent directed against the Church. The terrible decade opened with the murder of an archbishop. The decade ended with the murder of six leading Jesuit intellectuals. In between, many priests, nuns and lay-workers were killed and of course tens of thousands of peasants and workers, women and children, the usual victims.

The terrorism was so extreme that it even led to a condemnation of the US by the World Court for international terrorism, and an order to terminate the crime and pay reparations. There was also a supporting resolution of the Security Council of the United Nations, calling on all states to observe international law, directed to the US, as everyone understood. The World Court decision was simply dismissed with contempt and the war was immediately escalated. The Security Council resolution calling all states to observe international law was vetoed.

All of this is gone from history. It is history, but it is not the history that we hear. Since the same war was re-declared on September 11 – by many of the same people, with the same rhetoric – there have been endless reams of paper devoted to the new ‘war on terrorism,’ but you will have to search very hard to find any reference to what happened during the first ‘war on terrorism’ that the same people carried out. That’s gone, and it’s gone for very simple reasons: terrorism is restricted to what they do to us. What we do to them, even if it is a thousand times more horrible, doesn’t count and it disappears. That’s the law of history as long as history is written by the powerful and transmitted by educated classes who choose to be servants of power.

Let me turn to the Middle East. The British of course ran the Middle East for a long time. They were the dominant power, and they had a framework for controlling the region. At first it was controlled by direct armed force. But after World War One, Britain was weakened, and it was no longer in a position to rule the area by direct force. So it turned to other techniques. The military technique it turned to was the use of air power to attack civilians. Air power had just become available, so Britain began bombing civilians with aircraft. Also it turned to poison gas, primarily under the influence of Winston Churchill, who was a really savage monster. Churchill, as Colonial Secretary, ordered the use of poison gas against what he called ‘uncivilised tribes’: that’s Kurds and Afghans. He ordered

the use of poison gas against these ‘uncivilised tribes’ because, he said, it will cause a ‘lively terror’ and will save British lives. That’s the military side. It’s worth remembering that poison gas was the ultimate atrocity after World War One.

The details of this we are not going to learn. The reason is that ten years ago the British government declared an ‘open government policy,’ to make the government more transparent so the people, citizens could learn more about it. The first act of the open government policy was to remove from the Public Records Office all the documents having to do with the use of poison gas against the uncivilised tribes. So that history is gone.

There was also a political side to the control of region. The British concept was to create what they called an ‘Arab façade’: that means weak states that would depend on the British for support and would serve as a ‘constitutional fiction’ behind which the British would exert actual rule.

When the US displaced Britain it essentially took over the British model. The region is to be run by an Arab façade of weak, corrupt states, which rely on outside support for their survival; they are to administer the region. In the background is the US with its military muscle when it is needed. And the US has a kind of attack dog, which is called ‘England,’ and sometimes seems as much an independent country as Ukraine was under Soviet rule. Its main function is to carry out the services it learned during its centuries of experience – the services described by the leading British statesman Lloyd George, who wrote in secret that ‘We have to reserve the right to bomb the niggers.’ That’s important, and that’s the British role when the master needs some assistance, or the pretence that it is acting for the ‘international community’ – a term that means the US and whatever other country agrees to go along.

The US did add an innovation. It added an intermediate level of peripheral states, states that would be ‘local cops on the beat’ in the words of the Nixon Administration, who used the American idiom: the ‘local cops on the beat’ are the police who are working in the streets. In this case, the ‘local cops’ are subsidiary states. Police headquarters is in Washington. Turkey was the first one. Turkey is the ‘local cop on the beat,’ with the task of ensuring that the Arab façade is protected from their own population, the most dangerous enemy. Turkey was one of these, Iran under the Shah was another. After 1967, when Israel destroyed the centre of Arab nationalism, it joined the alliance. Pakistan was a member for a long time. The idea is to have non-Arab states that are militarily powerful, and can protect the Arab façade from indigenous forces that have strange ideas: for example, the idea that the wealth and resources of the region should go to them, instead of going to rich people in the West and their local associates. Such ideas are called ‘radical nationalism’ and they have to be suppressed: by the ‘local cops on the beat,’ who have the first responsibility, and if they are not a sufficient threat then the US and the attack dog move in, using the local cops as bases.

Oil was the primary reason for the concern over the Middle East. There is now a secondary reason, which is quite important. That’s water, which is enormously

important, and will be even more so in the future as water resources are being depleted. Here the role of Turkey becomes even more essential, because Turkey, and particularly the south-east region of Turkey, is the major source of water for the region. And control over water also provides what US planners 50 years ago called 'veto power,' just like control over oil. If you can terminate the flow of water to other countries, that will bring them into line. That's presumably a significant purpose of the dams and other projects: to ensure that control over water will be in the hands of US clients, which will ensure control over the region and probably a veto power over recalcitrant elements.

The enormous US support for the massive atrocities of the 1990s in this region, which are some of the worst in the world in this period, is based on the role of Turkey within the US system of domination of the region. It's not out of love of the Turks. It is out of love for the services that Turkey can perform in the region. If Turkey succumbs to 'radical nationalism' – that is, independence – it will suffer the same fate. The same is true of US support for Israel and other client states. If they perform their function they are fine. If they get out of line it will be different. We see that right next door in Iraq. As long as Saddam Hussein was only gassing Kurds and torturing dissidents and massacring people on a huge scale, he was just fine. Britain and the US continued to support him. After his worst atrocities they even continued to provide him with the means of developing weapons of mass destruction, along with aid and assistance that he badly needed, until he made a mistake: he disobeyed orders. That's unacceptable, so he therefore has to go, probably to be replaced by some similar figure. And the same is true for other client states. They are acceptable no matter how many atrocities they carry out as long as they continue to fulfil their functions within the world system: to ensure that the rich and powerful receive what they deserve, namely the wealth of the region and its resources and markets, and so on.

Let's turn briefly to the last topic: September 11th. What we hear constantly is that after September 11th, everything changed. There is a good rule of thumb: if something is repeated over and over as obvious, the chances are that it is obviously false.

In this case, after September 11th very little has changed. Policy, goals, concerns and interests of the great powers remain as they were. There have been some changes. For one thing, there is now a window of opportunity for harsh and repressive elements throughout the world to pursue their policies with increased intensity, exploiting the fear and concerns of their populations, and expecting support from Washington.

As always repression elicits resistance, and that's true in this case too. In the US, contrary to what the headlines and intellectual commentary tell you, since September 11th the population has become more open, more questioning, more dissident, more involved in protests, more concerned with ongoing developments. The same is true world-wide. Two weeks ago there was an international conference in Brazil, the World Social Forum, which brought together about 60,000 people from around the world, from popular movements,

farmers, workers, environmentalists, women's groups, all kinds of people. They organised many very serious and constructive forums and discussions devoted to major problems of the world. This is the core of the world-wide popular opposition that is designing, and seeking to implement, programmes that run counter to the global policies of transferring even more wealth and power to hands in which wealth and power are already concentrated.

The same is true right here. In Turkey, both Turks and Kurds are resisting courageously, working for changes that will make the society more open, liberal, free and just. They are a model that Western human right activists admire and should learn from. They are providing an inspiring example of what can be done under extremely harsh conditions to overcome repression and state violence to create a more decent and humane society. Their struggles and their goals are an inspiration for others to do more. And again, that's why it is a tremendous privilege and honour personally for me to stay with you for a few days here.

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As you know Kurdish language has been suppressed in Turkey, and is has been kept out of the educational system. What is the relationship between personal identity and the mother tongue? On the one side there is widespread use of English as a global language, and on the other there is a revival of local languages as a counter-trend to globalisation. In this context, how do you assess the revival of native languages in Europe and elsewhere?

In Spain under the Franco regime, the local languages were suppressed. People could not speak Basque or Catalan, or other languages. And they are separate languages, not Spanish; Basque is not even related to Spanish. After Fascism was overthrown, there was a revival of these languages, which of course had never disappeared. People still spoke them in their homes, with their friends when the secret police were not listening. And they revived. I will tell you a personal experience: one of my daughters was living in Spain after the fall of the Franco regime. She was living in Barcelona, and when I was in Europe speaking I went to visit her. This was two years after the fall of Franco, and there wasn't a sign of Catalan. Everything on the streets was Spanish, the signs were Spanish, everyone on the street spoke Spanish, just travelling there you would not know that the language of the people was Catalan. I went back five years later and there was no Spanish, there was only Catalan: the street signs were Catalan, the books were Catalan, the school system was Catalan, the language just revived. The same thing is happening in the Basque country and other places. And elsewhere, for example, inside the United Kingdom. So, Welsh for example, was not heard much not very long ago. Now if you go to Wales and listen to children coming out of the school, they are talking in Welsh. The language has been revived. It is a part of a healthy movement within Europe away from the nation-state system towards what is sometimes called a 'Europe of the Regions,' a federation of regional areas with their own language, culture, political autonomy within a

bigger federation. And that's extremely healthy. What the questioner said about personal identity is quite true. Your personal identity is very closely tied to your native language. If this is a language which is not permitted to be freely used for communication, for talk, for expression, for literature, for song, for any purpose, that's an infringement on your fundamental human rights. And it diminishes you as a person. Therefore it has to be preserved and recovered, and this can be done, as is happening in many places. The question of what will happen to local languages is largely a matter of choice, not a matter of historical forces that are out of control. There was no way of predicting that Welsh would again become the language of the people of Wales, their literature and so on. There was no way of predicting that. It happened because they chose to achieve that result. Regionalisation is taking place in Europe in reaction to the centralisation of the European Union. And I suspect that reaction to the centralisation of what's called 'globalisation' will also include a revival of local languages, cultures, interest groups of all kinds, for example feminist groups that don't have any geographical boundary. But that has to be achieved. Nothing is going to happen by itself. It has to be achieved like all other human rights by dedication, commitment and struggle. Otherwise it won't happen. As for English becoming an international language, that's a separate matter. It's a matter of who has been dominant. English is a world language because England and the US conquered the world. As the world becomes more diversified, and I suspect it will, there will be other languages of international communication. That's quite apart from the question of the revival and the vitality of the regional and local cultures, languages, and literatures, and so on. These developments can go on in parallel.

How do you define the notion of 'freedom'?

I would not even try. It's a fundamental basic concept that we understand but we can't define. We understand such concepts, but can't hope to define them in words. We define them by our actions and by our commitment. Freedom is what we make of it. If we stand against repression, authority and illegitimate structures, we are expanding the domain of freedom, and that's what freedom will be. That's what we create; there is nothing to define in words.

In the 'new world order' of US hegemony, what kind of threat is the notion of 'culture' under?

It's a matter of will and choice. History doesn't have natural laws the way physics does. It depends on what people decide and choose. That's why nobody can ever predict anything. If you look at the record of prediction in human affairs, you find they can't predict anything. The main reason is that too much depends on will, choice, determination and commitment. So what will happen to cultural freedom under new global conditions depends on what people like you decide to do. If you create and maintain vital and vigorous independent cultures,

they'll exist. If you decide not to, if you want to just listen to Brazilian soap operas and drink soft drinks, they will disappear. But there is a choice.

You are a US citizen who knows how to say 'NO!' We read in your biographies that you have been a dissident since you were ten years old. What is the secret of this?

The secret is very simple. For hundreds of years in the US, as elsewhere, people have been struggling hard to enlarge the domain of freedom and justice and there have been successes. And the result is that people like me are lucky. We can enjoy the privilege of enjoying the freedom that has been won. These are not gifts, they are not in the Constitution, they are not in the Bill of Rights. James Madison, one of the main founders of the US system, said that a 'parchment barrier' will not defend against repression. Take any nice words you like, you have to give them their meaning, and the meaning is given by struggle and commitment. And it has been done over the centuries to a very significant extent. The result is that people in the US have freedom to a larger extent. The secret is to have a history behind you of people who dedicated themselves to creating a relatively free society. That's the secret.

What do you think is the role of the United States in the Kurdish problem in general, and in the handing over of the Kurdish leader to Turkey, as part of an international conspiracy, in particular?

The US has a role in just about anything that happens in the world. It is the most powerful state in the world. It is concerned with developments here and it is undoubtedly involved in Kurdish affairs. Not just here, the same in Iraq. For example, the US supported a Kurdish uprising in Iraq, back in the early 1970s, until a certain point came when an Iranian-Iraqi deal was made and the US decided to sell the Kurds out, and they were slaughtered. After that Henry Kissinger, who was in charge, was criticised in Congress for having first supported the Kurdish struggle and then abandoning them when they were no longer useful, resulting in slaughter. He made a famous comment, which was something like this: 'Foreign policy should not be confused with missionary work.' The same has been true here, in a particularly shameful way in very recent years.

As you know, the Kurdish opposition turned to peaceful means of struggle. What do you think about this new policy?

You know better than I do. This is not the first time. In 1993, a ceasefire was declared by the Kurdish opposition. The European Union tried to pressure Turkey to respond constructively to it. Instead, the Turkish government, with crucial US support, escalated the war. That led to years of further atrocities and destruction. There is now another move towards a peaceful political settlement.

It's the right move in my opinion. The question arises what will be the reaction of the Turkish government, and this heavily depends on the US. Will there be constructive reactions? We have to try to make that be the case. As people in the US, we have to try in our own way. It can develop further. It's the right direction, and I think it will lead to a fruitful outcome.

As you know, there is a 'Meeting of Civilisations' in Istanbul, where Kurdish civilisation has not been represented. This meeting is supposed to be an antithesis to the 'Clash of Civilisations'. What is your opinion about the thesis of 'clash of civilisations?'

The fact that Kurdish civilisation was not represented is for the same reason as the fact that Palestinian civilisation was not represented, or any other repressed group. These are meetings of powerful states and other powerful forces in the world. They don't represent anyone but themselves, and furthermore they don't represent civilisations. The lives of the Saudi Arabian élite probably centre in London, and that is where they belong. It's probably where they will flee if there is an internal uprising they can't control. They have little relation to the people of Saudi Arabia, just as the ruling élites of other countries have little relation to their own population. The US government, for example, certainly does not represent the US population. The population in the United States strongly opposes some of the most important and basic policies pursued by the government, which therefore have to be pursued in secret. The talk about civilizations is mostly propaganda.

As for Islam being considered the enemy, that is surely not true. In the 1980s the major foreign policy issue in the United States that dominated all discussion was the wars in Central America, and these were wars fought against the Catholic Church, not Islam. The Catholic Church in Latin America, after centuries of serving the rich, had moved towards an effort to serve the poor, and at once it became an enemy. Many terrorist atrocities were directed against the Church. Was there a Clash of Civilisations? No. At the same time, the US was strongly supporting the most reactionary Islamic state in the world, namely Saudi Arabia, which has been a US client since its origins. The US was also organising the most extreme radical Islamists it could find in the world, because they were best killers, and was using them as weapons against Russia. Indonesia, the biggest Islamic state, was a wonderful friend ever since President Suharto took over in 1965 and carried out a huge mass slaughter killing maybe a million people, mostly peasants. He immediately became a great friend, and remained so while he committed some of the worst crimes of the modern era. In 1995, the Clinton administration described Suharto as 'our kind of guy.' True enough. The world does not break down into clashes of civilisations, it breaks down into power interests that cross languages and cultures, and mostly are fighting against their own populations. The notion of 'clash of civilisations' became popular after the end of the Cold War when some new propaganda framework was needed in order to mobilise people. It does not mean anything beyond that.

What is the probability of a US attack on Iraq? How will this affect Turkey and the Kurds?

This is an important issue that is on the agenda nowadays. There are two kinds of reasons for a possible US attack on Iraq. The first is domestic, internal to the United States. If you were an advisor to the Bush administration, what would you say? Would you say, 'try to focus people's attention on the Enron Scandal, and the fact that the proposed tax cuts for the rich will undermine all social programmes and will leave most of the population in serious trouble'? Is that what you want the people to pay attention to, policies like these? Obviously not. What you want is for people to be frightened, to huddle under the umbrella of power, not to pay attention to what you are doing to them while serving the interests of narrow rich and powerful sectors. So you want to have a military conflict. That's the domestic side.

On the international side, Iraq has the second largest reserves of oil in the world. The first is Saudi Arabia, Iraq is the second. The United States certainly will not give up control of this huge source of power and wealth. Furthermore, right now, if the Iraqi oil were to come back into the international system, it would be largely under the control of Russia, France and others, not US energy companies. And the US is not going to permit that. So we can be pretty confident that one way or another the US is trying to ensure that Iraq will re-enter to the international system under US control. Now, how do you achieve this? Well, one plan, and this plan has been discussed in Turkey as you know, is for the US to use Turkey as a mercenary military force to conquer Northern Iraq with ground troops while the US bombs from 20,000 feet. The compensation for Turkey could be that it will get control of the oil resources of Musul and Kerkuk, which it has always regarded as part of Turkey. And for the US, that will block its enemies – Russia, France and others – from having privileged access to the oil of that region. Meanwhile the US will take over the South in some fashion. What happens to the Kurds? I hate to think about it. It will probably be a terrible slaughter of one kind or another. They will be right in the middle of this. For Turkey, apart from the question of right and wrong, it would be a very dangerous move. And it's a very dangerous move for the US as well, if only because it could blow up the whole region. It could lead to a revolution in Saudi Arabia. Nobody knows. Elements of the Bush administration are pursuing these and similar plans, and you can see the logic. Whether they will be allowed to implement such plans is another story. I'm rather sceptical. I think the arguments against it are probably too strong. But they don't know themselves, and surely no one else can.