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Prospects for Settlement of the Israeli-Arab Conflict

NOAM CHOMSKY*

These remarks will be rather narrowly focussed. I will not consider questions of right and justice or the merits of conflicting claims, but will concentrate on the likely consequences of proposed policies and programs. Secondly, I will limit attention to only one of the many problems of the region, the Israeli-Arab conflict.

For some time, the United States government has been committed to an "incremental" approach that seeks to reduce the short-run likelihood of conflict between the major military powers: primarily, Israel and Egypt; secondarily, Israel and Syria. Within this framework, priority is assigned to separation-of-forces agreements and other measures to reduce tension. The approach has had some limited success and may lead to more far-reaching arrangements, despite the present stalemate, since it conforms to the immediate needs of the belligerent states and the United States. Nevertheless, I believe that this policy is short-sighted and fraught with danger. To see why this is so, let us consider the likely consequences of success in the current negotiating efforts.

Let us assume that arrangements are reached between Egypt and Israel that leave Israel in control of (1) the "inner territories," namely, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; (2) areas in the Golan Heights and the Sinai to which Syria and Egypt, respectively, will surely not renounce their claims. For the tenure of this hypothesized agreement, there will be no military conflict. Let us assume further that the agreement contributes as intended to reduction of the short-run probability of war. What is likely to ensue? Specifically, how is the Government of Israel likely to act under these circumstances, with regard to the occupied territories (1) and (2)?

There are three kinds of evidence that bear on this question: statements by government officials and other political spokesmen; actions currently in progress and plans now formulated for implementation; the record of recent history. Evidence of these categories converges: there is every reason to suppose that Israel will continue its programs of development in the occupied territories, leading to integration and some form of annexation.

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The political leadership has been consistent and explicit on this score. The present government, like its predecessor, has repeatedly confirmed—not, to be sure, in official pronouncements, but in statements by high officials—that Israel will not retreat from (i) the Gaza Strip, (ii) the Golan Heights, (iii) Northeastern Sinai, (iv) Sharm el-Sheikh and an access to it, and (v) much of the West Bank, including a considerably expanded Jerusalem, the settlements of the Jordan valley, and unspecified other regions. Responding to Hussein's proposal for a Jordanian federation including the West Bank in March 1972, the Israeli Parliament declared that "(T)he Knesset has determined that the historic right of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel is beyond challenge;" the "Land of Israel" is understood as including the West Bank. The Jordan is regarded as Israel's "security border," implying at least Israeli military control over the West Bank, though some other form of "sovereignty" may be permitted, indeed, welcomed, since it will overcome what is called in Israel "the demographic problem," that is, the problem posed by the presence of Arabs within the Jewish State. The governing party recently announced that Northeastern Sinai bordering the Gaza Strip must remain "within the Israeli map," along with the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights and the access to Sharm el-Sheikh.¹ These programs, which have wide popular support within Israel, preclude any long-term settlement with Egypt, Syria, or the Palestinians.

Furthermore, in all of the regions mentioned substantial and long-term development programs are in progress or in the planning stages. The budget for development in these regions has been expanded for the current fiscal year, indicating Israel's commitment to these projects despite its severe economic straits. By any reasonable measure, investment for development projects is higher in the occupied areas than within the "green line" (the pre-June 1967 borders). In the 1975-6 budget, it amounts to IL. 1.7 million per family.² These programs will, of course, create political barriers to any withdrawal, and it must be assumed are undertaken with this consequence in mind. These projects extend—more precisely, accelerate—the pre-October 1973 developments, which culminated in the August 1973 electoral program of the governing party, virtually a program for eventual annexation, and so understood both within Israel and in the Arab states.³

1. Cf. David Lancashire, Associated Press, Boston Globe, June 20, 1975; N.Y. Times, June 20, 1975, at 9, col. 7; Yuval Elizur, Washington Post, June 21, 1975.

2. For some details, see Darin-Drabkin, *The Economic Aspects of Defense*, NEW OUTLOOK: MID. EAST MONTHLY 51 (Mar.-Apr. 1975).

3. For an informative review of this period, see A. KAPELIOUK, ISRAEL: LA FIN DES MYTHES (1975).

The intention to develop and slowly integrate the territories cited is clearly understood within Israel, as are the political consequences of such a decision. The leading Israeli newspaper, the independent Ha'aretz, comments editorially that:

it is important for Israel to remember that the difference between Washington's and Moscow's attitudes concerning an overall agreement is small Although from Israel's viewpoint, the two super-powers' attitudes are exceedingly remote from hers in this matter Concerning the central issue of borders, Israel will need to conduct a political battle at Geneva, not just against the Arab countries and the Soviet Union but also against the United States.⁴

The problem is that both the Soviet Union and the United States are committed, formally at least, to a settlement along the lines of the various United Nations Resolutions, while Israel intends to maintain its control over the territories cited. Hence the "political battle" foreseen if the Geneva conference is ever convened.

Reduction of the probability of military conflict will, in the eyes of the Israeli leadership, restore the essential features of the situation prevailing prior to October 1973, when the risk of war was considered negligible. As their statements and actions clearly indicate, they will proceed with the programs of that period, now accelerated, with the intention of "building facts" in the occupied territories that they expect to retain.

The official position of the government of Israel is that there can be no Palestinian state, but only two states (Israel and Jordan-Palestine) within the former Palestine (plus whatever areas Israel intends to retain outside of this region; at the very least, the Golan Heights and Northeastern Sinai). The question arises: why should Israel so adamantly refuse to consider the possibility of a Palestinian state in the region from which it eventually withdraws? The grounds offered are "security," but it is difficult to take this argument very seriously. Suppose that Israel were to withdraw from a region sufficient for the establishment of a Palestinian state within the inner territories. On this hypothesis, consider two alternatives: (1) a Palestinian state is established within this region; (2) the region reverts to Jordanian rule. It is obvious that situation (2) is far more dangerous for Israel. A Jordan-Palestine incorporating some substantial part of the inner territories would pose a far greater military threat to Israel than a Palestinian state in this region, contained within the Israel-Jordan alliance and existing at the sufferance of its more powerful—and, it is to be expected, watchful and even hostile neighbors. Jordan-Palestine will have a measure of independence and military

4. HA'ARETZ, April 14, 1975. Lengthy excerpts appear in Israleft News Service, No. 61, May 4, 1975, P.O.B. 9013, Jerusalem.

power that a Palestinian state will never attain. Furthermore, as the most dynamic, educated and numerous element within the projected Jordan-Palestine, the Palestinians may be expected, sooner or later, to gain control over this state; it is striking that right-wing Israeli advocates of the "Jordanian solution" have often proposed exactly this. If, as assumed, Palestinian hostility is a serious and dangerous problem, solution (2) maximizes the threat. Thus Israel's advocacy of a Jordan-Palestine, as distinct from a Palestinian mini-state within the inner territories, seems paradoxical.

The paradox is resolved as soon as we recognize that a Palestinian state, however small, would have to be granted some region within the inner territories that would not remain under Israeli military occupation. But Israel has no intention of relinquishing military control over any such region. It is the hypothesis of the preceding paragraph that the Israeli leadership rejects. Its advocacy of (2) and rejection of (1) merely serves to demonstrate, once again, that Israel intends to retain control over the inner territories, along with the others mentioned earlier.

As noted, Israel might agree to have some part of the West Bank placed under local or Jordanian administration, while remaining under Israeli military control. In fact, explicit proposals of this character have been put forth. This is the essence of the "Allon plan," so far, the least expansionist program even discussed by anyone close to power. Furthermore, it seems that proposals to this effect have been made secretly to Jordan, but rejected.⁵ More than this is not contemplated. For this reason, it is impossible for Israel to consider the possibility of a Palestinian state, even though it would hardly be more than a protectorate of Israel and its Jordanian ally. Note that Jordan may be expected to remain an ally (tacit, to be sure) of Israel, under the American aegis, if a Palestinian state is established in which Palestinian nationalist energies will be contained.

For similar reasons, Israel has refused to permit any political activity or organization within the occupied territories. In 1967, the military commander of the West Bank, General Haim Herzog, proposed to the Government that right-wing Palestinian groups be encouraged in these territories as a counter to the PLO. Even this request was refused, and government censorship prevented Herzog from making his suggestion public.⁶ Under the present Rabin government, the repression in the West Bank has been significantly intensified. The immediate cause is that any relaxation leads to expression

5. Cf. General (Reserve) Mattityahu Peled, *The Imagination is Dwarfed by the Reality*, Ma'ariv, August 9, 1974.

6. See his statement in EMDA (December 1974).

of support for the PLO. But the real point is that no independent Palestinian voice can be tolerated in these regions, for the reasons already explained.

Let us now return to our initial hypothesis: that the incremental approach achieves some success. Under the assumed conditions, Israel will persist in its programs of development and integration, as just outlined. One consequence will be an increase in Palestinian terrorism, since there will be no alternative for the Palestinians short of national suicide. Israel will undoubtedly intensify its "retaliatory" actions in Lebanon. The repression within the occupied territories and the expulsion of Bedouins in Northeastern Sinai will continue. Hostility between Israel and the Arab States will persist as well. Whatever the private wishes of the leadership of the Arab States, they cannot openly accede to the destruction of Palestinian nationalism or the permanent occupation of territories of the Arab States. The arms race, already a crushing burden for Israel, will intensify, spurred by the insatiable need of the international arms producers (the United States far in the lead) to recycle petrodollars, and the perceived self-interest of the rulers of the oil-producing states. Israel cannot possibly match the resources of its potential enemies, but it can also not fall far behind in the competition. Israel's overwhelming military victory in 1967 significantly increased its security problems as well as its military budget. The problems will only grow under the conditions we are assuming. Even in the absence of war, the domestic consequences within Israel will be severe, both social and economic. The economic crisis will worsen. Emigration of the skilled and educated will probably continue, as in the past year, while immigration and investment will continue to decline. The Arab economic boycott may be expected to be far more effective with the shift of economic power to the oil producers. Similarly, Egypt will be unable to face its desperate social and economic crisis under the conditions of preparation for war, and internal disorder may erupt with unpredictable consequences.

Eventually, there will probably be a war, as virtually all analysts on all sides anticipate, at a level of armaments far higher than before. Until now, Israel's urban concentrations have been spared, though in Egypt in 1970 and Syria in 1973 civilian targets were subjected to heavy bombardment. In the next war, Israel is unlikely to remain immune in this regard. Given the level of armaments and the interests of the major powers in the nearby oil-producing regions, the war may escalate to a serious international conflict, which the local participants (not to speak of others) will be lucky to survive.

These are the likely consequences of success in the current "incremental" negotiations. The likely consequences of failure are simply that the process outlined will be accelerated. For these reasons, the current debate over who is to blame for the failure of Kissinger's "shuttle diplomacy" is an exercise in futility and irrelevance. Whether the negotiations succeed or fail hardly matters. The whole framework is a prescription for disaster.

While naturally one can only speculate about these matters—we are discussing politics, not physics—the preceding analysis seems to me rather plausible, and perhaps compelling. If so, the question naturally arises whether there is another framework, more favorable to the interests of the local parties and others concerned with the affairs of the region. There is, I think, a far better framework, one that offers some hope of a peaceful settlement. The alternative framework places emphasis on the fundamental political issue rather than the military confrontation. That is, priority will be assigned not to the military confrontation between Israel and Egypt (and secondarily, Israel and Syria), but to the conflict between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, the two national groups that claim national rights in a single territory. In terms of military power or social organization, there is no comparison, of course, between these two opponents. Nevertheless, their conflict is at the heart of the problem. As long as it is not resolved, other problems will not be put to rest. The conflict will simmer and threaten to erupt in a major conflagration. If their conflict is resolved, it is quite possible that other pieces of the puzzle will fall into place.

Prior to October 1973, various solutions might have been imagined for this local conflict. Now, there is really only one. Israel must relinquish the inner territories, with perhaps minor territorial adjustments, along the lines of the Rogers Plan and U.N. Resolution 242 of November 1967, as generally understood throughout the world. But these plans, which offered nothing to the Palestinians, were unjust at the time and entirely unfeasible now. The areas relinquished must be assigned to the control of the Palestinians, those who live there now and those in the Palestinian diaspora. There is very little doubt that their decision will be to form a Palestinian state and that this state will be organized by the PLO. The two states—Israel and Palestine—must reach agreement on a peace treaty within a regional settlement in which the other presently occupied areas will revert to Egypt and Syria, with demilitarized zones, perhaps an international peace-keeping force on both sides of the border (not only on the Arab side, as before 1967), serious efforts to reduce the level of armaments,

and moves toward cooperative regional arrangements. As for Jerusalem, the most reasonable suggestion would seem to be for it to serve as the joint capital, a unified open city.

The great powers have much incentive to try to reduce the likelihood of conflict and should therefore be able to find ways to work together to enhance such a solution. There is good reason to suppose that Egypt will welcome such a settlement, as it has indicated for several years. The same is true of the oil-producing states of the Arabian Peninsula, Jordan, and perhaps Syria. The Soviet Union has long advocated such a solution, and it is not inconsistent with official American policy, at least prior to 1970, when the Rogers Plan was tacitly abandoned in favor of support for *de facto* Israeli annexation of the occupied territories, as Kissinger took control of Middle East policy. The United States, however, has no commitment to this "Kissinger plan" of the pre-October 1973 period; it was predicated on the assumption that Israel's military hegemony was beyond challenge and that its economic and technical advantages would if anything increase. The plan will be abandoned if it is seen to conflict with the fundamental American interest: to ensure that the United States maintains its control over the distribution of Middle East oil. Israel fears that the superpowers may converge on such a program, as the editorial comment cited earlier indicates.⁷

For the Palestinians, such an outcome will be a bitter disappointment, but there is no realistic alternative for them. There are some indications—though no official statement—that they will reluctantly accept such a settlement.

A settlement along these lines seems feasible. It offers no guarantee of long-range peace and security for any of the parties concerned—and we must recall a point often overlooked: the Arab States surrounding Israel also have a security problem, and the "security problem" of the Palestinians is incomparably more severe than that of any of the other parties. There are no guarantees in this world. Talk of "iron-clad guarantees" is simply shorthand for refusal to negotiate. The great powers, whatever they may promise, will act in the perceived self-interest of dominant groups. The United Nations will be free to act insofar as the superpowers permit it to do so. International law will be interpreted by the great powers in ways conducive to their perceived interests, as when the United States invades South Vietnam or the Dominican Republic or when the Soviet Union invades Hungary or Czechoslovakia. Surely, no rational person will have illusions on this score.

7. *Supra* note 4.

But the fact remains that a settlement of the sort outlined is in the interest of the superpowers, the surrounding Arab States, and even Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, much as they may resist it. For the present, it seems that Israel's objections pose the primary barrier to any such settlement. Given its present policies Israel's long-term prospects for healthy existence or even survival are dim. Nevertheless, for the present Israel is the dominant military power in the region. Its refusal to come to terms with the Palestinians—and it must be emphasized that under present conditions, that means the PLO—will bar the way to any settlement and will lead, very possibly, to the grim outcome sketched earlier. Israel's only hope for decent survival lies in a political settlement with the Palestinians and its gradual integration into the region, in some evolving pattern of cooperation.

It is quite natural that Israeli Jews should fear their neighbors and trust only in their military strength. But they must come to understand that the basis for decent survival lies in accommodation, and that the risks that must be taken as they move towards such an accommodation are considerably smaller than the risks of continued military confrontation. Israel's military victory of 1967 will prove to have been a disaster for the Jewish community unless those groups within Israel that appreciate and understand these facts gain in influence and political power. Those who are concerned for the fate of Israel and its people should, in my opinion, lend such support as they can to such groups, and should refrain from strengthening those elements, now dominant, that are committed to occupation and military confrontation.

For Israel, it would be far better for a political settlement to arise from its own initiatives. Alternatively, it may simply be imposed by the great powers, a far less favorable outcome as far as Israel is concerned. It is particularly important to emphasize these points in the United States. American support for the most intransigent and expansionist elements within Israel contributed to the near disaster of 1973, and is likely to have still more bitter consequences in the future.