[AFTER 68 YEARS: WHY IS THERE NO SOLUTION TO THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT?]

Noam Chomsky Lecture for Palestinian Civil Society.
After 68 years: Why is there no solution to the Israel–Palestine conflict?

The question raised by the proposed title is one of the most significant ones in world affairs, and one of the most curious. For many conflicts in the world – say Kashmir, or Syria, or many others – it is not easy to think of a way even to significantly improve the situation, let alone to offer a short-term settlement. The case of Israel–Palestine is quite different. For 40 years there has been an overwhelming international consensus on a short-term settlement that will not of course solve all of the fundamental issues, but will sharply reduce the level of violence and severe repression, and will offer some hope of moving on. But it cannot be implemented. That fact does indeed raise significant questions.

Before proceeding, it is important to bear in mind a simple point of logic. There can be no Israel–Palestine conflict if one of the contestants does not exist – that is, if Palestinian national rights are not recognized. That is elementary. We therefore have to look into the history of recognition of Palestinian national rights. And that crucially means recognition of Palestinian national rights by the major actors: Israel and the US.

In the international arena, Palestinian national rights have been recognized for 40 years, but not by Israel and the US in any meaningful way, if at all. The current international consensus on Palestinian rights was articulated clearly in 1976,
when the three Arab “confrontation states” – Egypt, Syria, Jordan – brought to the UN Security Council a resolution calling for a two-state settlement with guarantees for “the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of all states in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries.” The resolution was vetoed by the US, again in 1980. Similar resolutions have been voted regularly in the UN General Assembly, opposed by the US and Israel, sometimes along with a client state. Rather strikingly, all of this is almost entirely unknown in the US apart from some specialist and dissident sectors.

The latest US veto was in February 2011, under President Obama. The vetoed resolution endorsed official US policy: that there should be no further expansion of settlements. That is a rather marginal matter: the fundamental issue is the settlements themselves, not their expansion. The fact that the US vetoed a resolution endorsing its own official policy gives some indication of why the international consensus cannot be implemented.

The question posed in the title asks “After 68 years,” that is, since 1948, when Israel declared formal independence and within a year was recognized by most of the world and admitted to the UN. At that point one of the contestants in the Israel–Palestinian conflict existed, but not the other one. From then until the 1970s, the Palestinians were essentially removed from the international agenda. The Palestinian issue was regarded as strictly a refugee problem – not by the Palestinians, but by the international community. Therefore, there was no Israel–
Palestinian conflict.

It is important to recognize how deeply this conception continued to be embedded in international diplomacy.

UN Security Council resolution 242, adopted in November 1967, is almost universally agreed to be the fundamental diplomatic document. It has no reference to Palestinians, except indirectly, with a phrase calling for a “just settlement of the refugee problem.”

In 1971, President Sadat of Egypt agreed to a full peace settlement with Israel in return for Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories; it was understood that what concerned him was the Egyptian Sinai. His offer included nothing about Palestinian national rights. Israel rejected the proposal, choosing expansion over security – a fateful decision, which has been maintained since. At the time, Israel was planning extensive settlement programs in the Sinai, including a major port city (Yamit) and many settlements, with thousands of Bedouins driven into the desert. Meanwhile colonization of the West Bank was proceeding with plans that have not changed a great deal over the years.

So matters have continued. Israel’s rejection of Sadat’s peace offer led directly to the 1973 war, which shocked Israel and the US, and led to the recognition that Egypt could not simply be ignored. Negotiations followed, leading to the Camp David agreements of 1978–1979, where the US–Israel had to accept pretty much what Sadat had proposed in 1971. Palestinian national rights were only
marginally included, and explicitly rejected by Menahem Begin. While Israel was compelled to abandon Sinai, colonization of the other occupied territories was accelerated, and with Egypt effectively excluded from the conflict, Israel was free to attack Lebanon, as it did shortly after.

So matters continued, with many important developments that I will have to skip for lack of time. Moving on, the Oslo agreements were reached in October 1993, with the announcement of the Declaration of Principles. The DOP stipulated that the final goal of negotiations would be based on UN 242 -- which, again, offered nothing to the Palestinians -- ignoring all UN resolutions on Palestinian national rights. Accordingly, it was obvious at once that this was a complete sell-out of Palestinian rights, accepted by the PLO. Several people wrote about this at once (I was one, Edward Said was another), but were disregarded. Colonization rapidly expanded.

The goals of Israeli official doves were outlined by one of the most honest and knowledgeable of them, Shlomi ben-Ami, Ehud Barak’s chief negotiator at Camp David in 2000. He explained that the “Oslo peace process” was to lead to a “permanent neocolonial dependency” for the Palestinians in the occupied territories, with some form of local autonomy. That seems to be quite an accurate assessment – though not one that enters the US doctrinal system.

What about Gaza? The Oslo agreements determined that Gaza and the West Bank are a single territorial entity, which cannot be separated. The US and Israel immediately moved to separate them. That is very significant. Any autonomy
that might be achieved in the West Bank would therefore be imprisoned, with no outlet to the outside world, an imprisonment enhanced further as Israel takes over the Jordan Valley. I will not run through the horror story of Israeli crimes in Gaza, always with US support. During the latest and fiercest assault, Israel’s Operation Protective Edge, the Israeli army was actually running out of munitions, so they were resupplied by the Pentagon, apparently from stocks prepositioned in Israel for potential use by US forces in the region.

Meanwhile, there was some grudging acceptance of Palestinian national rights. Not by Yitzhak Rabin or Shimon Peres. In Peres’ final press conference in 1996, he made it very clear that there could be no Palestinian state. He was followed by Binyamin Netanyahu, a hawk replacing a dove, in the official version. Netanyahu’s administration was the first to indicate that it would tolerate a Palestinian state – in an instructive way. David Bar–Illan, Netanyahu’s director of Communications and Policy Planning, explained in an interview that some territory will be left for the Palestinians, and if they want to call it “a state” they can – or they can call it “fried chicken.”

A year later, the Labor Party joined, stating that it “did not rule out…the establishment of a Palestinian state with limited sovereignty [in areas excluding] major Jewish settlement blocs.”

In brief, as late as 1997 there was no Israel–Palestinian conflict, at least in the eyes of the two major actors: Israel and its US backers.
We then move on the contemporary discussion of the international consensus on two states. I won’t run through details, which are familiar. At the diplomatic level, its actual status is revealed by Obama’s February 2011 veto of the UN Security Council resolution endorsing official US policy. The US regards colonization of the West Bank as “unhelpful,” “an obstacle to peace.” Through the 1970s the US recognized it to be “illegal,” as declared by the highest international bodies, the UN Security Council and in later years the International Court of Justice (with the oblique acquiescence of the US Justice in a separate opinion). But not by the US or of course Israel.

Let’s move to the present. Is a 2-state settlement still an option? The debate is standardly framed on all sides as counterposing two options: either two states, or Israel takes over the occupied territories and there is one state. Israelis express concern over this possibility because of the “demographic problem”: too many non-Jews in a Jewish state. Palestinians sometimes welcome this option as opening the way to an anti-apartheid struggle that could gain international support.

But the entire discussion is misleading because it ignores a third option – in fact, the one that is being imposed in the real world: Israel continues the colonization project that was initiated immediately after the 1967 war, relying on decisive US military, economic, diplomatic, and ideological support – while Washington laments that what it is supporting is unhelpful for peace. And the nature of the project is apparent. The West Bank and Gaza are separated, a matter of much
significance for the reasons mentioned. Gaza remains an open-air prison surviving on Dov Weisglass’s famous “diet,” subjected to repeated Israeli attacks, each more murderous than the last. In the West Bank a Greater Israel is being systematically constructed. It is to include Greater Jerusalem, which reaches vastly beyond any historic Jerusalem, along with corridors to the East through the towns of Maaleh Adumim, Ariel, and Kedumim, along with other expansions, leaving what remains to Palestinians cantonized. Israel takes over the “seam” to the Israeli side of the illegal “separation wall” – more accurately, “annexation wall.” As I mentioned, Israel is systematically taking over the Jordan Valley, intensifying the imprisonment of the cantons, and other areas as you see before your eyes.

The plans bypass Palestinian population concentrations, like Nablus. In the areas Israel is taking over, Palestinians are being removed, not en masse – that would cause international reaction – but step by step, following policies that go back a century: quietly, until facts are established on the ground, then recognized, just as George W. Bush and Barack Obama “recognize” that the settlement blocs and Greater Jerusalem are part of Israel. The colonization includes massive infrastructure projects integrating all of this to Israel, creating a Greater Israel in which there will be no “demographic problem.” With the settlers integrated into Greater Israel, the percentage of Jews in “the Jewish state” might actually increase.

For the Palestinians, what will remain is separated cantons, constant harassment,
little water, farmers separated from their fields, check points everywhere to make life as unpleasant as possible, settler violence — but in classic neocolonial fashion, a privileged place for elites, in Ramallah. Some industrial zones might be permitted so that Israeli industry, or multinationals if they can be attracted, can benefit from cheap skilled labor. In the background is the longstanding hope that many Palestinians, particularly the more privileged, will just give up and leave over time. That is the aspiration of settler-colonial societies generally, notoriously the US itself, where the process was implemented with extreme violence, even “extermination,” as recognized by the founders.

For Israel and its US backers, this option is far preferable to taking over the occupied territories and facing the severe “demographic problem” and an anti-apartheid struggle.

Accordingly, I do not think there is a serious debate between one and two state-settlements. Rather, for the immediate future, at least, the debate should be between 2-states or a settlement with Greater Israel and Palestinian cantons. If the two-state settlement is really dead, as many claim, then the likely alternative is the latter.

I might mention that another idea is now being discussed and presented as an alternative: a Palestine-Jordan confederation. But that is another illusion, as we can see from the conflicting interpretations. For the Palestinians, as Sari Nusseibah put it, “The confederation option with Jordan is a good idea, provided that a Palestinian state is established and that East Jerusalem remains a capital
for the Palestinians.” Netanyahu’s interpretation is that with the establishment of Greater Israel, the remaining cantons can be part of Jordan. So we are back where we were.

Is the two-state settlement really dead? If so, then we are left with the grim alternative that is being constructed before our eyes. But I think that judgment is premature. It ultimately depends on the US, the decisive actor throughout. When the US puts its foot down and insists, Israel must obey, given the power relations. We have seen that over and over, including very recently once again, with the Iran negotiations. If the US were to make it clear that the game is over, that it will no longer support colonization or even provide military funding as long as the occupation continues, Israel, which is already becoming internationally isolated, would be very likely to accept a political settlement that conforms to the international consensus and that is more or less acceptable to Palestinians.

Suppose that is achieved. What about the settlers? I think Israel should offer them a choice: move from your subsidized homes in the West Bank to subsidized homes in Israel, or if you prefer, stay in a Palestinian state – where, I think, they should be granted equal citizenship, just as Palestinians should be granted equal citizenship in Israel. The question I suspect is largely academic. The overwhelming majority would leave.

The next question is whether a shift in US policy is imaginable.

Before turning to that, if you don’t mind, I would like to introduce a personal
aside. In the 1940s, I was a Zionist youth leader – strongly opposed to a Jewish state. At the time, there were variants of this position from elites of the Magnes–Buber variety to left working class–oriented groups that I was drawn to. Now that stance is called “anti–Zionism” or “post–Zionism.” But the terms don’t matter. I’ve kept to the same position throughout my life, and still do, which is why I favor a two–state settlement in preference to the one realistic alternative, the Greater Israel project that is now unfolding.

Here we should be scrupulous about a distinction that should be second–nature to activists seeking results: the distinction between proposal and advocacy. We can propose that everyone should live in peace. The proposal rises to the level of advocacy if we sketch a path from here to there. The path depends on circumstances. In the case of Israel–Palestine, the possible paths to a single democratic state have varied. Pre–1948, it was straightforward. After Israel was established and recognized, tactics inevitably had to change. From 1967 to the mid–1970s, once again there were possibilities for direct advocacy of the position. I wrote and spoke about it at the time, but eliciting no interest (though plenty of bitter hostility): nationalist fervor was too strong.

By the mid–1970s, with Palestinian nationalism taking its place on the international agenda, tactics had to change again. Since that time, the only feasible path that I know of for actual advocacy of a unitary democratic state, rather than mere proposal, is in stages, with a two–state settlement the first stage. If it is established, I think it is quite likely that the borders, which are
hopelessly artificial, will begin to erode with cultural, commercial, and other contacts – as indeed has begun to happen when the cycle of violence has declined. That could lead to some sort of federal arrangement, then closer integration, perhaps reaching the goal of a single democratic binational state. And that should not be the end of aspirations. There is no reason to worship the borders imposed by imperial force, but that carries us on to different directions.

If there is another way to move towards a unitary democratic state, I haven’t heard it. In the absence of true advocacy, calls for such a state implicitly support the third option: continuation of current programs of construction of Greater Israel and cantonized unviable Palestine.

Let’s return to the question of whether US policy can change. That’s a large topic, but I think we can already see how that could happen. Particularly among young people, but not only there, attitudes in the US towards Israel–Palestine have changed markedly in recent years. Just speaking personally, not many years ago, I needed police protection if I tried to speak on these issues on college campuses, even my own. Now there are huge engaged audiences, and it’s hard to elicit a hostile question. Among liberal Democrats, a majority sympathize more with Palestinians than Israel, according to recent polls. And for the first time, this is becoming a serious issue within the Democratic Party. Just as in the international arena, so also within the US, popular support for Israel is drifting more towards the right: ultranationalists, those who hate and fear Muslims, evangelical Christians (a huge sector in the US, who form much of the base of
the Republican party), and others like them – much as what was predicted by opponents of the occupation in its early days.

The day may soon come when Israel will not be able to count on the kind of support that has been generally forthcoming ever since its leaders made the fateful decision almost half a century ago to reject security in favor of expansion, counting on Israel’s superpower patron to protect it from the consequences that were predicted at once and are now apparent: drift to the ultranationalist right, security threats, and international isolation, so substantial that Israel is by now increasingly seeking alliances with authoritarian regimes.

These developments are well understood by Israeli analysts. Mark Heller, principal research associate at Tel Aviv’s Institution for National Security Studies, writes that “Over the long term there are problems for Israel in its relations with western Europe and with the U.S.,” while in contrast, the important Asian countries “don’t seem to indicate much interest about how Israel gets along with the Palestinians, Arabs, or anyone else.” In short, the governments of countries like China, Singapore, India (with its drift to the nationalist right) are less influenced by the kinds of liberal and humane concerns that sometimes influence the policies of western governments that are under pressure from popular opinion that takes such concerns seriously. Hence they are more reliable allies for Israel as it drifts in the same direction.

The Israeli government is concerned as well. A leaked classified foreign ministry document sent to all foreign missions warns of possible diplomatic damage to
Israel due to "moves to mark settlement products, stop the supply of replacement parts; debates on sanctions against Israel; demands for compensation for damage caused by Israel to European projects in the Palestinian territories; European activity in Area C, under Israeli rule; and more." It warns further of the "decrease in security imports and supply of replacement parts to Israel – something that would primarily affect Israeli defense," noting that “In recent years, Britain, Belgium and Spain have all halted shipments of weapons to Israel, citing concerns that the arms would be used in violation of international law.” Such policies could well reach the US, where arms deliveries to Israel are in direct violation of US law (the Leahy amendment), which bars arms deliveries to military units guilty of systematic human rights violations. That is a potential organizing issue for advocates of a diplomatic settlement recognizing Palestinian rights.

There is a great deal more to say about all of these matters. I’ll stop here, however, and hope to learn about your thoughts on these topics and others that are of concern.