Reflections on a Lifetime of Engagement with Zionism, the Palestine Question, and American Empire

An Interview with Noam Chomsky

Mouin Rabbani

What is perhaps most striking about Noam Chomsky is his consistency. Over the course of more than half a century of political activism, accompanied by a ceaseless output of books and articles as well as innumerable talks and interviews, he has—to the best of my knowledge—never changed his mind on a significant issue. This is all the more impressive when considering the astounding range of his political interests, which span the globe geographically as well as thematically.

In many cases a refusal or inability to revise one's perceptions and prescriptions over the course of multiple decades in which the world has been transformed beyond recognition would be dismissed—even ridiculed—as the product of narrow-minded, anachronistic dogmatism. Not, however, in Chomsky's case. Not because he is a recognized pioneer in his chosen field of linguistics, and at the age of 83 remains the most significant public intellectual alive, but rather because he has consistently eschewed doctrinal commitments as the basis for his interpretation of reality.

Throughout his life, Chomsky has been motivated first and foremost by a deep, palpable commitment to the rights and dignity of human beings and their communities, and an equally visceral opposition to the elites and institutions that trample this humanity underfoot when it gets in their way, and has interpreted the world accordingly. His anarchist beliefs notwithstanding, I suspect he considers his main principle to be common sense, more often than not derived from an encyclopedic knowledge that he remains capable of deploying at a moment's notice.

Although Chomsky the political activist first became known for his early opposition to the Vietnam war (an engagement which he continues to insist began far too late), his involvement with the Palestine question predates this by several decades, largely on account of the milieu in which he was born and raised. In the interview below, Chomsky recounts this early engagement, and how it developed over the course of his lifetime.

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He also reflects on how things have—and have not—changed, and where the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could and should be heading.

The interview was conducted at his Lexington, Massachusetts home on 14 May 2009 and 21 November 2010. The occasional question was asked twice, to which he gave an almost verbatim response—itself a mirror reflection of things he had said and written a year, a decade, even decades earlier—yet made relevant to the context of today.

Between these meetings, in May 2010, he visited Amman en route to Palestine, where he was scheduled to deliver an address at Birzeit University. Banned by Israel's Ministry of Interior from visiting the West Bank—a Neanderthal decision that instantaneously catapulted an otherwise low-key visit into global headlines—he spent the next several days in Amman, giving a number of hastily scheduled talks (including to Birzeit University by videolink), several dozen interviews, and various meetings, stopping only briefly to rest when left with no choice by his daughter Avi and friends Assaf Kfoury and Irene Gendzier, who accompanied him from Boston. Next to his consistency, his level of energy (activism in the literal sense) is equally impressive, not just for a man in his early 80s, but indeed at any age.

When and how did you first become involved in the Israel-Palestinian—or, at the time—Zionist, issue?

I grew up with it. My parents were part of what amounted to a cultural ghetto, not a physical ghetto, which was the Philadelphia Jewish community. It had many parts, but the part they were deeply involved in was the revival of Hebrew cultural centers, especially Hebrew education. I became conscious of this in the early 1930s. My father was pretty much a disciple of Ahad Ha'am, whose version of Zionism was a cultural center for Jews in Palestine. My mother as well, and their circle of friends and associates was pretty similar. I went to Hebrew school and Hebrew college, and when I was old enough I started teaching at Hebrew school.

I was an organizer of what were then called Zionist youth groups, which I suppose would now be called anti-Zionist, because they were mostly opposed to a Jewish state. My own commitments early on, from when I was a teenager, would be socialist binationalism.

I can't say my views have changed a lot in that respect. Those were considerably different days, of course. But the groups, the people I was connected with were committed to Arab-Jewish working-class cooperation in a socialist Palestine.

Was there a specific movement you were affiliated with?

Well, these were pretty small movements. I was close to HaShomer HaTzair [the Young Guard]. I agreed with them pretty much on Palestine, what later became Israel-Palestine, and I later lived for a while at a

HaShomer HaTzair kibbutz with my wife. But I never joined because they were divided into two branches, one Stalinist and the other Trotskyite, and I was opposed to both. I was very strongly anti-Leninist at the time, from the Left—I thought Leninism [in both its Stalinist and Trotskyist forms] was a right-wing deviation. Those were very real commitments. Remember, this was the 1940s, not today.

Given your political commitments and perspectives back then, do you recall your response to Israel's establishment in 1948?

I, and in fact most of the people I was closely connected with, regarded it as a tragedy. First of all, because I thought—and still think—that breaking Palestine into two parts separate from one another doesn't make any sense. And secondly, because I had always opposed the idea of a Jewish state.

It's worth remembering that a Jewish state was *not* the official Zionist position when I was growing up. The first official commitment to a Jewish state in the Zionist movement was during World War II, with the Biltmore Program of December 1942. You could easily be a Zionist and think that this was a completely wrong move and a mistake.

What did you see as the alternative?

I think the alternative would have been a binational state, based on the existing cooperative institutions but bringing in Arabs and Jews together, working people and farmers and so on.

You mentioned going to Israel to live in a kibbutz.

Actually, it was just a couple of months, in the summer of 1953. My wife went back and lived there longer, and we were intending to go back to stay. I must say I found it a very attractive life on the kibbutz, and I liked the people.

Which kibbutz was it?

HaZorea, about a half hour from Haifa. At that time it was the center of Arab outreach for HaShomer HaTzair and considered the most, or one of the most, left-wing kibbutzim. Now it's very right wing, but it was originally Buberite and something of that atmosphere still remained in the '50s.

We went over for the summer, to get acquainted. My wife went back soon after and stayed for six months. She came back to the States mainly to pick me up, but in the end we didn't go back for various reasons not related to politics. I should say, though, that even then it was pretty clear that some pretty ugly things had happened in 1948.

This was known at the time?

Some amount was known, but the scale and the character were not understood. When I was living in the kibbutz that summer, I remember one day working in the fields with an older kibbutz member. I noticed a pile of stones and asked him what that was. He sort of shrugged and didn't want to say anything about it. But later, in the kibbutz dining room, he took me aside and said it was an Arab village, a friendly Arab village, and that when the fighting was intense, since it was a few miles away, they simply drove the people out and destroyed it. I don't know how many there are like that. Many more than are counted, I'm sure.

But after 1948 my feeling was that even though it had been a real mistake, after that the rules of the game had changed. The November 1947 United Nations partition resolution was treated as a tragedy in the circles I was in. But now there was a Jewish state, a country, too. And once the state became a part of the international system I saw no alternative—and see no alternative—to just saying that it has the rights of any state in the international system. No more, no less, though often it has demanded more.

All states are horrible. They were all formed by violence—the U.S. is sitting on half of Mexico. European boundaries were consolidated by force after centuries of savagery, and it's the same all around the world. So okay, here's one more.

After you left in 1953, did you go back to visit?

I went back in 1964. Basically it was for a conference, but I did some traveling and met with some of my old friends. I had a fair number of friends from here who were living there, but at that time there was no real passion for Zionism. In fact, among the more educated people, the Hebrew word *Tziyonut* (Zionism) was like a term of derision.

These were American Jews?

Yes. But the American Jewish community in general was not very much dedicated to Zionism then. For example, journals like *Commentary*, say, were all non-Zionist or even anti-Zionist at that time. It must have been in the mid-1950s that Mapai (the Labor Party) started a new journal, *Midstream*, to try to counter the non-Zionist character of *Commentary*. *The New York Times* was Jewish-owned, but non-Zionist. If you look at the pages of *Dissent*, which was put out by the Democratic Socialists, there are rare mentions of Israel before 1967, mostly disparaging. Same thing for individuals. Irving Howe, the editor of *Dissent*, was almost contemptuous of Zionism as just another religious nationalist movement. Progressives didn't want anything to do with it. It just wasn't an issue. As my friend Norman Finkelstein pointed out, *Commentary*'s editor, Norman

Podhoretz, wrote an autobiographical book that appeared in early 1967 that barely mentioned Israel, but after 1967, Podhoretz and most of these people became passionate jingoists.

It seems that in the two decades before 1967, with the exception of the time you and your wife spent on a kibbutz, you were basically disengaged from the issue.

I followed it, but there were no organizations, no discussions. The kinds of groups I had contact with, the intellectual circles, didn't care about Israel at all. Even during the Suez crisis in '56, it was a matter of being on the side of Eisenhower, I mean, what's to do? He took a pretty strong position.

But in 1967 there was a real belief that Israel was threatened with genocide. That was the standard assumption. Even before the war broke out I remember faculty peace groups organizing to send people to Israel to fill civilian jobs.

Do you remember what your views were at that time?

I didn't have any judgment of the military balance, though I thought the reports were exaggerated and that there were ways of settling the issues diplomatically, like the Straits of Tiran, which wasn't all that much of an issue anyway. At the same time there were horrendous stories of huge armies mobilizing on the borders, ready to swoop in and commit genocide.

Would it be accurate to say that the 1967 war in your case, as for others you've been associated with in this country, such as Edward Said, was a turning point?

Of course. Because then the issue was not only Israel and its rights, but also the occupied territories. It was after 1967 that I started giving talks and writing about it. Actually, the first talk I gave was organized by my friend, Assaf Kfoury, then a graduate student at MIT, in 1969. It was actually a pretty mild talk, "Peace in the Middle East," but it caused real tantrums. In fact, a delegation of Israeli professors came over to the house afterwards to try to talk me out of my heresy. And these were dovish Zionist professors, the kind who would be in Peace Now later, maybe even Gush Shalom.

What was your basic message?

I was reviewing the binationalist possibilities that had existed before 1967, and my basic point was that they were now realistic again. They weren't possible between 1948 and 1967, but with Israel now in physical control of the territories, I believed then (and believe even more now, as

more information has come out) that it was possible to establish a kind of federal arrangement between Jewish and Palestinian areas. And then, if circumstances were appropriate, as I thought they might turn out to be, it would be possible to move towards closer integration and come closer to what I always regarded as the binationalist ideal for the region.

I should say that in the back of my mind I have always thought there was a better solution, not a one-state or a two-state solution, but a *no*-state solution. That's not pie in the sky, that's how the region pretty much was under the Ottomans. No one wants to bring back the Ottoman Empire and all the corruption and the violence and everything else, but they had the right idea about some things. They left people alone, so that the Greeks could run their section of the city, and the Armenians their section, and so on, and there was plenty of interchange, commercial and other. And they had no borders, or they didn't mean much. So you could travel from Cairo to Istanbul to Baghdad without going through border controls. There was essentially free movement.

It sounds like the EU!

You know, Europe for centuries was the most savage place in the world. The level of savagery was so extraordinary that they developed both the means and the culture to conquer the world. And a large part of the reason for the savagery was the attempt to impose the nation-state, which is extremely unnatural; it breaks up people who have natural connections, it imposes unity on people who are not unified, whether by language or culture or anything else. It takes a lot of violence and brutality to impose a rigid frame on complex, fluid organisms like human societies. That ended in 1945, not because the conflicts were over, but because Europeans realized that the next time they played their favorite game of slaughtering one another, they'd destroy the world.

Of course this same pattern has extended all over the world. I mean, wherever European colonialism went, nation-state systems were established with the same savagery and violence, and in fact most of the major conflicts in the world now flow directly from European—and I'd include North American here—efforts to impose highly unnatural nation-state systems. And this is the case also in the Levant. So I don't think there are any natural lines you can draw in the Levant that make any sense from the point of view of people's lives.

How do you square your commitment to binationalism with what is seen as your opposition to the one-state settlement?

It's not true that I am opposed to "one state," what I oppose is the failure to sketch out a sensible path to get from here to there. And the only sensible path that has been laid out begins with the two-state settlement.

Many of those who favor a one-state solution see it as the antithesis of the two-state solution, yet you seem to be suggesting a continuum.

I don't know of any other sensible way that has been proposed to move towards a binational, or one-state, solution other than accepting the world as it is and then taking the next step, which has been pretty clear for thirty years. There's an overwhelming international consensus behind the two-state settlement essentially along the internationally recognized borders. I think it's a rotten solution but I think it's a stage towards a better solution, and I don't know of any other approach.

Actually, I think "one state" is the wrong notion. I think the better notion is a binational state, because there are two separate cultures, different languages, different traditions, which should be able to live in cooperation and harmony. In fact, European states are moving in that direction. Take Spain, where now there is substantial autonomy in Catalonia and the Basque country, and there will be elsewhere in other regions. The same thing is happening in the U.K. In Wales, the language has been revived. Scotland now has gotten a degree of autonomy. I think things are moving in a direction more related to people's actual interests and needs, and that makes for a richer, more satisfying society.

In response, though, people might say that in Europe this process was endogenous, both in drawing the borders and now in replacing them, whereas in the Levant, it was imposed from outside.

True. But ultimately, at least in my judgment, people within the regions have to come to realize that they would be better off without the borders. I think that can happen in a pretty natural way, and to some extent has happened with Israel-Palestine. I mean, Israelis were going to shops and restaurants in the West Bank, relations were being established, even with the harsh border controls and settlements. If that was removed and the cycle of violence and hostility was terminated, this could happen even more effectively.

I want to return to the one-state/two-state issue, but for the moment let's get back to the period 1948–67. I'm trying to understand the connection between your deep personal involvement up to the early 1950s and your seeming disengagement afterwards, which lasted until 1967.

The connection is that from the early 1950s to 1967 I saw no hope. What I, and the people I was involved with, were hoping for—a socialist, binational, working-class cooperation in Palestine—was off the agenda then, but after 1967 it seemed to me—and I still believe this—that those issues could have been revived. Not in the pre-1948 form—too much had changed—but Israel could have instituted a federal structure with Palestinian autonomy in the occupied territories within that overarching

framework, which could over time lead to closer integration and eventually the erosion of boundaries. Of course, Israel would be in control for some time. I think that was actually feasible back then. I was alone on this, of course, and really engaged on such ideas only with Israel Shahak and maybe two other people.

When you became active on Middle East issues after 1967, was that something related to your personal background, or did you see it as also being connected to the other issues you were engaged in, like American foreign policy?

Oh, yes. I mean, control over the Middle East, especially the energy-producing regions, has been *the* driving force of American foreign policy since World War II. The documentary record wasn't completely available then, but it was already clear.

In fact, the U.S.'s very close relationship to Israel was established pretty much after Israel's 1967 military victory, which was regarded by American elites as a great contribution to U.S. power. Nasser was right at the heart of the nonaligned movement, which was despised and detested. Neutralism was indistinguishable from communism—you know, you're either with us or against us. Another pillar of the nonaligned movement, Indonesia's Sukarno, had been ousted shortly before this, in 1965, with the Suharto coup, which the U.S. strongly supported, and which slaughtered maybe a million people and opened Indonesia up to Western exploitation—another "great victory." Well, in 1967 Israel dealt a huge blow to Nasser, and this was of particular importance because it's closely connected to control over Middle East energy supplies. At that time, after all, Saudi Arabia and Egypt were essentially at war, a kind of proxy war. Saudi Arabia and Islamic fundamentalism were the most favored element in U.S. foreign policy in the region, and remain so until today in many ways.

Actually, I didn't know it then, but U.S. efforts to control the Middle East had been the leading theme in U.S. foreign policy since World War II. One of Roosevelt's main advisors, A.A. Berle, said around the late 1940s that if we can control the Middle East, we can control the world. The State Department described the Middle East as a "stupendous source of strategic power," the "greatest material prize in history." Those were the common conceptions of planners in the late 1940s. In fact, even during the war they began to sense this, with a mini-war going on between the U.S. and Great Britain over who would control Saudi Arabia.

It was after 1967 that many of your peers, I think, developed a blind spot when it came to Middle East issues.

Yeah, I mean, Israel's victory in 1967 touched a nerve among liberal intellectuals in the United States and was *very* much welcomed. Not so

much in my own immediate circles that were engaged in resistance to the Vietnam war, but among the general liberal intellectual community. From *their* point of view, Israel's victory was a godsend, because finally someone had come along and showed the world how to deal with third world upstarts properly.

This being a reference to Nasser again?

Yes, to the Arabs. A kind of generalized phenomenon of which Nasser was the symbol.

That's the liberal intelligentsia. But what about the Left?

The Left was kind of critically dovish Zionist. If you mean the real Left, it was opposed to the occupation.

But generally silent on the issue?

You're right, in that the occupation was not a major focus. For one thing, it was not clear that the occupation was going to be permanent. If you had access to what were then classified Israeli cabinet records, you would have known, but at the time it looked like they might withdraw. And remember that up until 1971 the official American position was that Israel should withdraw from the occupied territories with "minor and mutual modifications" of the ceasefire lines. That was the official position from 1967—UN [Security Council Resolution] 242—up till 1971, and it was very easy for left liberal intellectuals to say "okay, we agree with the American government," and for the affected parts of the world to say, "Okay, we don't like it, but they're going to withdraw, the issue is settled."

1967 changed everything here; it was almost instantaneous. Suddenly the intellectual community has a passion for Israel, it was a love affair. Support for Israeli actions became reflexive: as I mentioned earlier, people like Irving Howe and Norman Podhoretz, who had been indifferent to Zionism, became almost fanatic Zionists after 1967. This is partly because now the U.S.-Israeli alliance was firmly in place, making it possible to support the U.S. government and look humanitarian at the same time. You could support violence and terror and be noble and humanitarian, defending the Jews from anti-Semitism and genocide, and so on. This is an irresistible combination for liberal intellectuals. You can see the same phenomenon elsewhere, like in Bosnia.

But actually, the love affair wasn't new. It had existed in American society before. If you go back and read the press of the 1920s, 1930s, you have a similar picture. I didn't know this at the time, but this country had already been steeped in Zionism, this whole conception of biblical promises being realized. It's not just Christian evangelicals; a large

segment of the population was immersed in the Bible; Woodrow Wilson read the Bible every day; for Truman it was real. Lawrence Davison has written a good history of the early period with plenty of press quotes. Harold Ickes, one of Roosevelt's main advisors, described the Jewish return to Palestine, to use his exact words, as "the most remarkable, historical event in history." I mean, this is a very deep current of British and American thought. It's a mistake to dismiss it.

There's also the crusader element. When General Allenby conquered Jerusalem in 1917, he was compared with Richard the Lion-hearted, depicted as having achieved what the crusaders had tried to do and failed: drive the infidels out of the holy land. His obituary repeated the same thing twenty years later. It's kind of like how China talks about its century of humiliation. For the West, there was 1,300 years of humiliation when the pagans took our Holy Land. Now it's back in our hands, back in the civilized world, and the Jews are returning. And they are modern and European and developing, and the Palestinians were supposed to be gaining enormously from these progressive elements in their midst. It just captured the American mind.

I believe that it captured the American mind in these earlier periods, but was it really a factor between 1948 and '67?

It was never a factor among liberal intellectuals. It wasn't Irving Howe, but it was there, it's part of the general cultural background. And 1948 triggered it. It triggered the End-Times Revival, which later became important. The Jews were back in Palestine, in Jerusalem, so the Second Coming is imminent. Now Christ will return, and we will have a thousand years of peace. That is a big piece of American society. I mean, that's not part of the intellectual world, but there is maybe a third of the country that believes that every word of the Bible is literally true. About the same number thinks the second coming will be in their lifetime. This was the background of 1967, when "Arab fanatics tried to destroy Israel." So there was a kind of revival of this earlier spirit, though of course 1967 was very different from 1920.

You've spoken quite a bit about how U.S. policy elites responded to 1967, and also the liberal intellectuals. But what about the more progressive intellectuals?

Like who? I'm trying to think . . . Well, I did write for a good pacifist journal, *Liberation*. They were dovish Zionists and thought Israel should withdraw from the occupied territories. The organized peace movement, like SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] and others, objected to the occupation and took a dovish Zionist line that wouldn't be very different from groups or people in Israel who became Peace Now later on, who

called for withdrawal from the territories. There was virtually no talk about the Palestinians. Palestinian nationalism didn't really reach the general public agenda until the mid-'70s. But really, there was almost nothing in terms of principled positions on the issue.

How do you explain this? Because these aren't people who necessarily had an urge to ingratiate themselves with the power structure and so on.

Take someone like Howard Zinn. We never talked about the conflict much. In fact, if you look at what he wrote, I don't think you will find anything in his writings about Israel and the Palestinians until probably this last decade. Remember, Oslo came immediately after the first intifada, and that was perceived—not by me, but by many—as moving towards peace.

So, is it just this huge blind spot?

Well, first of all, another thing happened after 1967 which is very important: the emergence of the Holocaust as a major issue. Since 1967, and especially 1973, there are Holocaust museums in every town, Holocaust studies are part of the curriculum. Of course people knew about it before, but if you just look at the record from 1945 until the mid-'60s, it was not an issue. The founding scholarly work on the Holocaust, by Raul Hilberg, was written in 1958 or '59, and it was kind of dismissed; he was even criticized for it. It was like what the Communist Party used to call "premature antifascism," you know, before Stalin said fascism was *not* okay. Hilberg writes rather bitterly about this in his memoirs.

For all those years it was, "we don't want this issue, the Jews are trying to integrate into American society, we are trying to improve relations with Germany, we don't care much about Israel, let's forget about this old stuff."

In fact, to this day, almost nobody knows how American Jews reacted to the Holocaust. During the war and in the early and late '40s, there were plenty of pressures to get the British to stop blocking immigrants from going to Palestine from Europe. The Leon Uris business, *Exodus* and so on, everybody knows that. But why were they not coming to the United States? After the war, survivors were living in camps not very different from the concentration camps, except there were no gas chambers. They were living under miserable conditions. The camps were taken over by Zionist emissaries, and we now know—which wasn't known then—that they were organizing to direct able-bodied men and women to go to Palestine, which essentially meant cannon fodder. Maybe some wanted to go, but I doubt that was their first choice. The Jewish organizations in the U.S. didn't want them. There was virtually no pressure here to allow Jewish immigrants into the United States.

Because it might have been seen as a burden on the process of integration?

Yes. In fact, as far as I know the only Jewish groups that lobbied for Jewish immigration from the camps was the Council of Judaism, an anti-Zionist group. There was anti-Semitism in the country, it wasn't violent, but it was there. At Harvard University, for example, where I was in the early '50s, you could cut the anti-Semitism with a knife, a very Waspish, class-based anti-Semitism. There were maybe two or three Jews on the faculty, and that is one of the reasons why MIT became a great university. People like Norbert Weiner and others couldn't get jobs at Harvard, so they went to the engineering school down the street. This changed later, but in the late '40s, it was that way.

In fact this goes way back. Louis Brandeis was already involved with the Zionist movement in the 1920s. After the Balfour Declaration, he wrote to his aide, Felix Frankfurter, that this was a great idea. Just send the Jews to Palestine because that would keep the Russian Jews from coming here, like my parents. They didn't want people like that around—send the rabble to Palestine. But in the 1940s this rabble was dying in the concentration camps, and they didn't come here. Truman, for example, regarded himself as deeply humanitarian and very noble because he tried to get them to go to Palestine. The question of them coming here didn't even arise. The idea was, let them go there. It will be altruistic, they will build up the land, make the desert bloom, get rid of the swamps, and they won't be here.

So how did the anti-Semitism and the new emphasis on the Holocaust affect the post-1967 period?

The fact that the Holocaust revival suddenly became a major theme of the whole cultural system meant that from then on anything we do is against the background of the Nazi genocide. That automatically cut off serious questioning of anything Israel was doing. And the Israelis exploited it. Sometime around 1970, for example, Abba Eban wrote in the *Congress Weekly*, the journal of the American Jewish Congress, that the task of American Jews was to prove that anti-Zionism—which really means opposition to the policies of the Israeli government—is either anti-Semitism or neurotic Jewish self-hatred, which conveniently rules out everything. And he had two examples of Jewish self-hatred, me and Izzy [I.F.] Stone. Stone was a deeply committed Zionist. He went to Palestine as a correspondent in 1948 and was even kind of pro-Irgun. He never gave up his commitment, but because he was very critical of Israeli policies he was branded as a neurotic, self-hating Jew. I was, too, because of what I was writing, because for them any criticism of Israel could only be written by such people. So the task of the American Jewish community was to show that, which was pretty easy because there was almost no support for any critical commentary about Israel. The activist Left was

pretty much dovish Zionist. The democratic socialist Left, say, of *Dissent*, was very strongly Zionist. In fact, in my book *Peace in the Middle East?* there is a chapter that runs through their denunciations of people like Dan Berrigan, for example, because he was raising questions about Palestinian rights, which shows that he is some kind of extremist, pro-terrorist—and this is a priest who was jailed for spilling blood on draft records as part of the Vietnam movement.

But even taking into account the factors you've mentioned, it's still quite breathtaking how little opposition there was on the Israel-Palestine issue at a time when people seemed far more engaged in opposing U.S. foreign policy than was the case subsequently.

The Israel-Palestine issue wasn't really perceived as a foreign policy issue. I mean, the U.S.-Israeli alliance was clearly there, but on this issue it looked as if the U.S. was on the side of the angels. It was saving the victims of Hitler's genocide from destruction by the Arabs. That is why the reinvention of the Holocaust was so significant: it provided the context in which we were to think about what was going on in Israel-Palestine. And if you weren't necessarily on board with policy on the issue, you kept away from it because it's a touchy subject. As soon as you talked about it, you were instantly accused of being an anti-Semite and a Holocaust denier. In general, it was kind of accepted among colleagues or acquaintances that we weren't going to talk about this.

During the 1970s, in the U.S., you had close relationships with Edward Said and Eqbal Ahmad.

Yes, we were very close friends. With Edward the relationship was mostly personal, but also Middle East–related. With Eqbal there were many other things, too, since he was very active on many issues: Vietnam, Central America, issues of imperial oppression and domination. It was through them, especially Edward, that I came to have some direct experience of the PLO.

I understand that you were involved in attempts to explain to high-level PLO officials what might be more effective ways of conveying their message in the U.S.

Yes, well, I've never actually written or talked about that, except privately . . .

I thought these encounters might be revealing in terms of the movement and how it operated.

Well, yes, I do think they were quite telling. But they had so many problems that I didn't want to embarrass them further. Ed [Said] would set up

these meetings in New York when senior PLO types would be in town for the UN. This was roughly in the late 1970s, 1980. Ed's idea was to get them to listen to people who were sympathetic to the Palestinians but critical of their policies. So I was there, Ed, and Alex Erlich, a friend who taught Russian history at Columbia who was a real old-fashioned Bundist, a Marxist, anti-Zionist, a very honest guy. The meetings were pretty pointless. We would go up to their suite at the Plaza, one of the fanciest hotels in New York, and basically just sit there listening to their speeches about how they were leading the world revolutionary movement, and so on and so forth.

Let me tell you an anecdote that says it all. During the 1982 Lebanon war there was an Israeli, a very honorable man named Dov Yermiya, who wrote a terrific war diary in Hebrew. He was a civilian who had been one of the founders of the Haganah, had a very distinguished military record, and was a war hero in Israel. He had been sent to Lebanon to deal with the captured population. The diary was very revealing, searing. I thought it would be good for it to be available in English, and I got South End Press to have it translated and to publish it. But they didn't have any money, and it was never going to be reviewed and nobody would see it. So I asked Ed, who was close to the PLO leadership at the time, if he could convince the PLO to fund purchases and put the books in libraries so at least some people would see it. He came back pretty upset. He said they would only make the purchases if across the front page was written, "Sponsored by the PLO!"

What was striking was that these people had no idea that in a more or less democratic society it is possible to reach people. I mean, even the North Koreans in a crazy way tried to help solidarity groups. So I was extremely surprised by the PLO leadership's incapacity to understand what every revolutionary nationalist movement understands, which is that you *must* do something to get the support of the American people. There was a fundamental misunderstanding of how a democratic society works. Now, the United States is far from a magnificent democracy, but it's more or less democratic. Public opinion matters. The antiwar movement made a difference and solidarity movements with Central America made a difference, sharply limiting U.S. military intervention and so on. But the Palestinian leadership simply failed to comprehend this. If they had been honest and said, "Look, we are fundamentally nationalists, we would like to run our own affairs, elect our own mayors, get the occupation off our backs," it would have been easy to organize and they could have had enormous public support. But if you come to the United States holding your Kalashnikov and saying we are organizing a worldwide revolutionary movement, well, that's not the way to get public support here, and of course this was exploited and exaggerated.

There were many specific incidents where things could have been done that would have helped organize public support for the Palestinians,

but instead their actions and manner undermined such efforts. But what the leadership clearly wanted all along was invitations to visit the White House. A different conception of politics, a very antidemocratic conception, not recognizing that a deal in a smoke-filled back room is not politics. If there is going to be a change in U.S. policy, it will have to come from public pressure, and the public pressure will only come if you gain popular sympathy.

What do you see as the explanation for all this?

You would know better than I. My sense was that they were coming out of a quasi-feudal background in which this is not the way things happen. Things happen because of deals among leaders. Which is to a large extent true, but the public *cannot* be ignored.

Well, they did *get into the White House . . .*

Yes, they got in, in 1988 when Ronald Reagan and Secretary of State George Shultz finally recognized the PLO, but that's not what matters. You remember what happened: the intifada had been going on for almost a year, the Palestine National Council [PNC] had formally recognized the two-state settlement, and Arafat was to make a major speech at the United Nations. But Shultz and Reagan were pretending that Arafat was refusing to take any step towards a political settlement, so they weren't allowing him to enter the U.S. to address the UN—though this [travel ban] was illegal and the U.S. was becoming an object of international ridicule. I mean, here Arafat is openly saying let's have peace and the PNC had made this dramatic move and Shultz and Reagan are saying "We can't hear anything; all we hear is that you want war."

And in fact, you will recall that Israel's formal response to the PNC's formal declaration was that the coalition government of Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Shamir, in May 1989, declared first, that there would never be another Palestinian state between Israel and Jordan (meaning that Jordan is, by our dictate, already a Palestinian state and there can't be another), and second, that the fate of the occupied territories would be settled according to the guidelines of the Israeli government. That immediately was endorsed by James Baker, George H.W. Bush's secretary of state, and termed the Baker plan. Most of this has been written out of history because it's too embarrassing, but at that point, in order to save some international credibility, the Reagan and Bush administrations made some formal gestures and said "we'll invite some Palestinians to have some negotiations," but it was a sick joke. Maybe some Palestinians took it seriously, but the Americans and Israelis didn't. In fact, there was an article by the well-known Israeli columnist, Nahum Barnea, that described how Yitzhak Rabin met with Peace Now members and assured

them that they needn't be concerned about these negotiations, that they were simply a ploy by our American friends to permit us, the Israelis, to have another year to ensure that the Palestinians are crushed by force. And they *will* be crushed, he said. And this is just an opportunity for us to go ahead for another year while the world thinks that peace negotiations are going on.

When was this?

This is 1989, the beginning of the first Bush administration. But if the Palestinians thought they were getting into these smoke-filled rooms, they were wrong. The American ambassador [to Tunisia], Robert Pelletreau, made it extremely clear that we were not going to discuss anything. And Rabin was right: the Palestinians had a year and then they were crushed. And then comes Arafat's end-run around the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations with Oslo and so on.

But let me ask the question more broadly. Leaving aside how the PLO dealt with the United States, how would you assess them as a national liberation movement, in terms of leadership and mobilization?

I don't like Abba Eban, but he did say something that was unfortunately accurate: "The Palestinian leadership never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity." They were, in a sense, doing the right things, but doing them in a way that enabled their enemies, Israel and the United States, to undermine them at every turn. I think there *were* alternatives. This is one of the reasons that Edward Said dropped out and became bitterly critical of the PLO. Eqbal Ahmad as well, I should say.

But on the other hand, they did a lot of good things. They did succeed in keeping Palestinian nationalism alive under *very* harsh conditions, which is quite an achievement. They kept the spirit alive. There were periods, especially in 1988, when it really flourished, though without too much PLO initiative. It was mostly local, as I understood it. I can tell you that, traveling around the West Bank in spring 1988 (mostly with Azmi Bishara, sometimes with anti-Zionist Israeli friends), I was constantly surprised to hear activists, for example in Nablus, who were really doing good things, and when I would ask them what their political objectives were, they'd say, "You'll have to ask the PLO." At the same time, the expression of contempt for the PLO was unmistakable. They'd say, "We want to run our own affairs. Those guys are off in Tunis playing their games. But we're stuck with them; they are our national spokesmen, so go to them for formal statements."

What it looked like to me at the time was that Arafat was being sidelined by the local movements: there were protests in the refugee camps, and many dissidents in the occupied territories. A few years later, when

negotiations got underway after the 1990–91 Gulf war, the leading figure seemed to be Haydar 'Abd al-Shafi, who was heading the Palestinian negotiating committee. He was very firm that there could be no agreement unless it stopped settlements. Meanwhile, the outsiders, the Tunis people, were essentially making an end run around the Palestinian negotiations through Norway. They made a deal with the Israelis that brought the outsiders back in to leadership positions, but without Abd al-Shafi's conditions. There is nothing in the Declaration of Principles [DoP], the famous handshake on the White House lawn, which says anything about settlement expansion. Worse, it says nothing about Palestinian rights. All it says is UN 242, which does not even mention Palestinians. It makes 242 the end process of the Oslo agreement.

But when the DoP was signed, there was a feeling in Palestine that Oslo was the great hope for the future, that something wonderful had happened. Edward Said and I were among the very few people who disagreed strongly with what appeared to be the main feeling among Palestinians at the time. Both Ed and I immediately thought it was a catastrophe that would undermine Palestinian national rights. I wrote about it extensively at the time. I didn't know enough about the internal dynamics to know what the reasons were, but you could just see it from the documents, and then from what was happening at the ground.

With regard to U.S. foreign policy today, you have been quite critical of the Mearsheimer and Walt thesis of U.S. Middle East policy.

Well, I wish they were right, because if so there's an obvious tactical implication and I could stop all this endless work, writing, speaking, trying to organize—it would all be a waste of time. All you would have to do is put on a jacket and tie and go to the corporate headquarters of General Electric, JP Morgan Chase, the American Chamber of Commerce, the *Wall Street Journal*, and politely explain that U.S. policy in the Middle East on Israel is harming their interests. It's no secret that concentrated private capital has an overwhelming influence on government policy in all sorts of ways, so if in fact the "Lobby" is forcing the U.S. into policies that are against the interests of these people who effectively run the country, we should be able to convince them. And they would put the Israel Lobby out of business in about five seconds. The Lobby is peanuts compared to them. The military industry lobby alone vastly outspends and has much greater influence than the [Israel] Lobby does. So why hasn't anybody tried that? Well, because it is so totally implausible that it is not even worth talking about except as a joke.

The fundamental problem is the failure to face the fact that government policies don't come out of a vacuum. Mearsheimer and Walt are realists in international relations theory, which basically holds that the domestic power structure is not a significant factor in the formation of

state policy. State policy is supposed to be concerned with something called "the national interest," which is a kind of abstraction made in the interest of the population, but isn't. For centuries it's been understood that there are different factors within the society, different distributions of power, some more powerful than others. . . .

That should be a truism, but it is kind of erased from international relations theory. On the other hand, if we did accept it as a truism—and there is overwhelming evidence that it is, right to the present—then we would have to ask why those in a position to shape and determine U.S. government policy to a very substantial extent would be willing to accept something harmful to their interests? We would have to explain this strange contradiction, since they could easily change the policy if they wanted. I think the reason is very plain: that major sectors of private power in the United States find U.S. policies towards Israel quite acceptable.

Because?

Because Israel is a rich and advanced society. It has a powerful high-tech sector which is closely integrated with the U.S. high-tech economy, in both directions. It is very militarily powerful, very closely connected to the U.S. military industry and in fact to military policy. When Obama says "I'll give you F-35s," that's a boost to Lockheed Martin—a double boost because once the U.S. taxpayer pays Lockheed Martin, they send advanced jets to Israel and Saudi Arabia does not object to being sent second-rate equipment.

It's happening right now. The biggest arms deal ever has just been made with Saudi Arabia for $60 billion to give them military equipment. That's fine with Israel: the equipment is second-rate and there's not much they can do with it anyway. But quite beyond that, connections between U.S. military and intelligence and Israel have been extremely close for years. U.S. firms have been building facilities in Israel (for example, Intel, the largest chip manufacturer), and our military is going there to study urban warfare techniques. Israel is an offshoot of U.S. power in a strategically critical segment of the world. Now of course this enrages Arab public opinion, but the United States has never been concerned with that.

Are you saying the Lobby isn't a factor?

No, the Lobby is real. It's significant. That's not even a question—neither I nor anyone has ever questioned it. It's very well organized, it has its victories. But if it runs up against crucial power interests of the state or the corporate sector, it backs off. There is case after case I could mention. But when what the Lobby does more or less conforms to the interests of powerful domestic sectors, then yes, it is influential. That's quite true

of lobbies generally. For example, India's lobby in the U.S. apparently played an important role in pressuring Congress to accept the U.S.-Indian treaty, which effectively authorized the U.S. to support indirectly India's nuclear weapons program.

But if we go back to some of the things we were discussing earlier, many people would say that where these lobbies are most effective is not specific deals, but in shaping public opinion.

Yes, but they're pushing on an open door, because there are independent reasons why Americans tend towards Israel. Remember, this is a long-standing relationship that goes back long before Zionism. There's an instinctive identification that's unique. There's the American Indian comparison, you know, the barbaric redskins trying to prevent progress and development and attacking innocent whites: that's Israel-Palestine. In fact, it's right there in the Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson, the most libertarian of the founding fathers. One of the charges in the Declaration against King George III is that he unleashed the merciless Indian savages against us, whose known way of warfare is torture and killing and so on. That could come straight out of Zionist propaganda. This is a very deep strain in American culture and history. After all, the country was founded by religious extremists who were waving the Holy Book and describing themselves as children of Israel returning to the Promised Land. So Zionism found its natural environment here.

So would you situate the Lobby primarily within the broader cultural background, where Americans look at Israel and recognize themselves?

For many Americans, it's just instinctive that the Jews in Israel are reliving our history. They recognize themselves, and furthermore they recognize the crusaders who succeeded in throwing out the pagans. There's the analogy to the American conquest of the national territory, the Zionists use this analogy as well, but positively. We are bringing civilization to the barbarians, which is after all the whole core of Western imperialist ideology. It's very deeply rooted.

But all this is about the broad American public, "Middle America," if you will. What about the American intellectual community? Why would they turn toward Israel?

Well, it wasn't because the Lobby suddenly became more effective in 1967. Let's say some left-liberal intellectuals who previously had little interest in Israel or were antagonistic to it suddenly became impassioned supporters. Lobby propaganda had always been there. In fact, before 1967 it had failed in its efforts to get leading American journals like

Commentary, or publications like the *New York Times*, to adopt a more Zionist line.

But of course, talking about the Lobby is difficult because: what *is* the Lobby? Is the Lobby American intellectuals? Is the Lobby the *Wall Street Journal,* the main business newspaper in the political system? Is it the Chamber of Commerce? The Republican Party, which is considerably more extreme than the Democrats even though most Jewish voting is Democrat and most Jewish money goes to the Democrats?

What are the implications of these points you are making for people who would like to see a change in U.S. Middle East policy?

Well, I think it means we have to recognize that if government policies are going to change, they're going to change because of popular mass movements influential enough to become an element in policy planning like the antiwar movement of the 1960s.

You've alluded a number of times to the explosive nature of the issue, the difficulty of debating it in the U.S. Have you seen any change?

For a very long time, it was hard to discuss, and lectures on the subject would create great furors and sometimes violence. I have hundreds of examples, but I'll give one from the late 1980s when I was invited to give a week of philosophy seminars at UCLA. Of course I gave political talks on the side. The main issue then was Central America, which is what most of these talks were about. But one professor there, a kind of dovish Zionist, asked me if I could give a talk on the Middle East and I said sure. A couple of days later I got a call from the campus police, who wanted me to have uniformed police protection the whole time I was on campus, would I agree? Well, no, I would not agree. But undercover police followed me all over anyway—they'd sit in the seminar room when I'd be giving lectures and follow me to the faculty club and so on, their holsters on their hips. There was a lot of commotion and rising fervor about my Middle East talk, which was held in the central auditorium on campus—airport-type security, entry by just one door, everything inspected, and so on. The talk went on, it wasn't broken up, but after I left there was a huge personal attack on me in the college press there, not only on me but on the professor who had invited me. There was even a movement on campus to revoke his tenure, which failed, of course—he was a major figure. But it was indicative of the mood at the time.

It was like that even here at MIT. Whenever I would give a talk, the police would be there and would always insist on accompanying me and my wife back to wherever we were parked afterwards. When Israel Shahak spoke here in 1995, his talk was physically broken up by MIT students. Some of it was grotesque. I remember a 20-year-old kid wearing

a yarmulke who stood up and said, "How could you say that about us, when 6 million of us died?" This is Israel Shahak, survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto and Bergen-Belsen!! And this kid is telling *him* about how 6 million of "us" died and getting big cheers from the audience. A couple of my friends were in the back, who happened to be European refugees; they got out around 1939. They said they hadn't seen anything like that since the Hitler Youth. And this was 1995. Since then they have changed. They were beginning to change already at that time, but in the next ten or fifteen years, they changed a lot.

What accounted for the change?

There were a number of reasons. For one thing, young Palestinian students here in the U.S. really began organizing, and not the way the PLO had been doing. The issues they brought—oppression, occupation, aggression—were based on standard, liberal principles. They began to organize the way Central American solidarity and the anti–Vietnam war movements were organized, and it began to have an impact. It was dramatic after the Gaza invasion. I mean the Gaza invasion really did infuriate a lot of people. It was just so blatant—here was a huge military force attacking captured people who were completely defenseless and devastating them.

You would have thought, in the aftermath of 9/11, that the fact of Gaza's being led by this Islamic movement would have offset the outrage.

Well, it was the human aspect that affected people. Quite different from the coverage, of course. Even the Goldstone report and the human rights reports unanimously, I think, took the position that the invasion was justified but disproportional. And of course, there wasn't even a particle of justification for it. But that never came out; you could barely discuss it.

But the whole Gaza episode also showed that people have access to different kinds of information these days.

People always had access to information. Take 1982, which may be Israel's worst crime. There was plenty of available information. I mentioned Dov Yermiya's *War Diary*, for example, but it didn't penetrate. The massacres at Sabra-Shatila did. In fact, Sabra-Shatila was kind of like Gaza. It was so grotesque that even people like Elie Wiesel and Irving Howe had to say something. The *New York Times*, I remember, ran a page of criticism of Sabra-Shatila by all the leading Zionists. I remember Wiesel's comment: "For the first time I am sad—sad for Israel." Not sad for the Palestinians, of course. He had to say something at least. Gaza was an

exaggerated version of that. [In terms of the shifts] here I think that what Norman Finklestein has been writing about for the last couple of years is probably accurate. What Israel is doing is just too inconsistent with normal liberal values for young people to be able to tolerate.

In terms of their self-image?

Self-image. Most of them just say I'm not going to look at it, but those who are interested become critical. There's a growing alienation. Some of the criticism does verge on anti-Semitism, some of it is just, "I don't want anything to do with this; this has nothing to do with me."

Do you see similar changes in the general population?

Similar, but it is probably more prominent amongst Jewish intellectuals who have a connection to Israel. For a long time Israel has been the only thing that holds the Jewish community together.

When you look at this conflict, from the vantage point of today versus, say, 1950, what has been the most significant change?

Well, in 1950 there was no occupation. Israel was accepted as a state. Not much was understood about what happened, but the conception generally was that the Jews had been granted a state by the UN, that the Arabs attacked and tried to destroy it, and that heroically the Jews were able to defend themselves. I mean that's essentially the image, and it was kind of supported.

The U.S. government had an ambivalent attitude towards it. So for example, in 1956, there was no protest when Eisenhower ordered Israel out of the Sinai; it wasn't a major issue. In 1967, there was of course a dramatic change, in ways we've talked about. And then over the following years, opposition to the occupation and Israel's repressive ways began to develop, slowly, much increasing now, even internally.

In some respects, Israel has become more democratic. For example, the most extreme form of internal discrimination in Israel has been the whole land law system, designed to ensure that about 90 percent of the land remains under the control of the Jewish National Fund, which is contractually committed to serve the people of Jewish race, religion, and origin. But in the year 2000, the High Court reversed that policy, at least formally. The reversal still has not been implemented except very marginally, but it is there, which is not insignificant, even though right now there is legislation in the Knesset trying to reverse the decision in various ways. So these are live issues in Israel. But in the territories, it's just consolidation of the plans that began to be implemented in 1967 and have been intensifying since.

And this brings me to the next question, which is where you see the Israeli-Palestinian, or the broader Arab-Israeli, conflict heading in the years to come?

I think that may be related to what has not changed. The main thing that has remained the same, and has in fact grown, is Israel's dedication to what Moshe Dayan back in 1967 called "permanent rule" over the occupied territories. Now it's true that there came a point when Israeli hawks, led by Ariel Sharon, realized that they'd turned Gaza into such a ruin that there was no point keeping a few thousand Jewish settlers there, taking a third of the land and much of the water and protected by a large part of the IDF [Israel Defense Forces], so they decided to take them out of Gaza and put them in the West Bank and the Golan Heights. That was described as a disengagement and a very generous step. In reality, Israelis were almost open in describing it as a step towards enhancing colonization, but the PR aspect played pretty well.

Besides that, the settlement expansion has systematically increased, though slowly, in a manner that goes back to the origins of Zionist settlement in the early 20th century when the typical symbol was the watchtower. Not ostentatious. You set it up, put a fence around it. Nobody talks about it. Sooner or later, it gets connected to the water and the electrical system. A couple of families are brought in. Then pretty soon, you have a town. But *quietly*. Delaying political settlement. It's "Let's keep building, but let's keep it quiet." Or, as they put it in Hebrew, "We don't tell the goyim. We just do it." What matters, as David Ben-Gurion said once, is "what the Jews do, not what the goyim think."

That's what is happening right before our eyes. Israel, backed by the U.S., is continuing to do exactly what it wants in terms of settlements: they are not maintaining but *expanding* the status quo. And I don't see it changing, unless U.S. policy changes.

I don't suppose you hold out much prospect for that.

Well, look, in 1998, I couldn't see any prospect for U.S. policy towards Indonesia in East Timor to change. A year later it did. South Africa is the more significant analogy. In my opinion, most of the many analogies people make to South Africa have little basis, but there is one that is real, and it relates to U.S. policy. The white nationalist regime understood very well that the U.S. held the key. In fact, back around 1960, when the country's international pariah status was becoming clear, the foreign minister called in the U.S. ambassador and said, "Look, everyone is voting against us in the UN. We're becoming isolated, but it really doesn't matter, because you and I know that there is only one vote in the UN that counts, namely yours. As long as you back us up, we don't really care." And all through the 1960s, opposition to apartheid

increased and nothing much happened until 1977, after the UN imposed an arms embargo.

By the early 1980s, opposition to apartheid in the United States had become quite strong. American corporations were beginning to pull out, Congress passed sanctions. But the U.S. government, the Reagan administration, continued and even increased its support for the regime and managed to evade sanctions through various means; in fact, Israel was used as a conduit for this, one of the secondary services it performs for us. So if you look back at the late 1980s, the South African white nationalists seemed triumphant. They had virtually destroyed the African National Congress [ANC] as a fighting force; they were gaining everything they wanted. Yes, they were internationally isolated, but it was U.S. support that counted, and in 1988, the Reagan administration called the ANC "one of the more notorious terrorist groups in the world"—that was their phrase.

The U.S. had to support white nationalism as part of the war on terror. In fact, Mandela only got off the terrorist list two years ago. It was only in 2008 that he could come to the United States without special dispensation. But shortly after, the U.S. changed its policy. Apartheid was collapsing. Mandela was let out of his Robben Island prison. We don't have internal documents, but it seems that U.S. and South African business recognized that they would do better if apartheid ended but the socioeconomic system was retained with little change, which is pretty much what happened.

And you think that a similar scenario is plausible in the Middle East?

It's not identical, of course, but it's somewhat similar, and if the U.S. decided to pull the rug out from under Israel, I think they might be compelled to follow orders. In fact, you can imagine a scenario that is not very pleasant. Take for example General Petraeus's comments early in 2010 about Israel, which were quickly silenced. I forgot the words he used, but something about how what Israel was doing is harming U.S. troops in the field. Okay, so here's your sensitive American nerve: our brave boys, men and women, defending us in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Jews are harming them. We won't accept that. The same idea was reiterated more quietly by other significant figures, including Bruce Riedel, quite a high-ranking ex-intelligence figure who's still high up in the whole system—he was the one who ran Obama's review panel on Afghanistan. He said similar things, very straight, clearly reflecting a position that is held in the military and intelligence, but sort of kept quiet. But suppose that broke through? You would get a wave of anti-Israel sentiment that might be overwhelming, that might turn into outright, blatant anti-Semitism significant enough to shift government policy. This is not my choice scenario, but there are many examples of unexpected policy shifts.

One of your main points seems to be that the key to this conflict lies in Washington, not in the region.

In Washington *and* in the American population, if it can be organized and active. For years when I was working on the Vietnam war, I never expected Vietnam to survive. The country was devastated, but it survived. You can't know. But the point is that there is simply no alternative, no method that can ultimately bring about change other than public pressure—organized, dedicated, sustained. A lot of hard work.

Talking about where the conflict can go from here takes us back, in a way, to that discussion we started earlier about the one-state versus two-state debate.

Much of the debate, such as it is, says the alternatives are the two-state and the one-state settlement. A common argument is that if Israel doesn't accept the two-state settlement, Israel will be an apartheid state. Not too long ago, Sari Nusseibeh, I think it was, said something to the effect that we should just give Israel the key. They'll annex the whole West Bank and then we'll carry out a civil rights struggle. So Israel becomes like South Africa and we run an anti-apartheid struggle. Many supporters of Palestinians rights support that.

But it's not going to happen that way. The Israelis don't *want* to take everything over; they want a *Jewish* state. They don't want what's called "the demographic problem." They want to set it up so they don't have to worry about Palestinians—and the U.S. backs them. And the way to do that is to continue current U.S.-Israeli policies, which will leave Israel ethnically mostly "pure" with no responsibility for the Palestinians. I mean, Israel already holds about 40 percent of the West Bank. Where we're headed now is that they'll take everything inside the annexation wall, take over the Jordan Valley, keep on building settlements and putting in salients here and there, breaking the West Bank into cantons. And then they'll just leave the Palestinians to rot in their Bantustans, while Israelis and American visitors can zoom past on the super highways not even knowing that Arabs exist, except for maybe somebody up on a hill leading a goat—nice picturesque biblical scenes. But Israel is not going to take any responsibility for them, and in fact, that's been clear since 1967.

So how is that different from what you had in South Africa?

Oh, South Africa was totally different. In South Africa the economy was *completely* based on black labor; it could not survive otherwise, and the blacks were a huge majority of the population. In fact, South Africa did not try to destroy the Bantustans and even tried to make them livable because they needed the people and had to govern them. But Israel does

not want the Palestinians. I mean, for a time they *did* rely on Palestinian labor, but that was long ago, and since then what they've done is build on the ruins of neo-liberalism, and now desperate people come from all over the world to work there as a kind of a slave labor force.

Again here, I don't see any way out unless U.S. policy changes. Given the international consensus built on the two-state settlement, and the lack of any meaningful support for anything that bypasses that stage, if there were to be a U.S. shift, it could only be in that direction.

It's interesting that someone who's known to be an anarchist with a long-standing commitment to binationalism is seen as a fierce critic of those advocating a one-state settlement.

I am not opposed to anyone who's advocating it. I'm opposed to people who propose it but *don't* advocate it. There is a crucial distinction. You can propose anything you want, that we all live in peace and love each other, like in an ashram somewhere. All this feels very nice, but it doesn't mean anything until you give some account of how to get from here to there. Advocacy means "Here's the way we're going to do it." And I know of only one form of advocacy today, which is to get there by stages. In the early 1970s, there was another path for advocacy: pressure Israel to institute a federal solution.

It's interesting that back then the very idea of one state, or binationalism, was absolute anathema. You couldn't mention it without being denounced as an anti-Semite and Holocaust denier and so on. Today, rather strikingly, you can propose the one-state in public, in the *New York Times* or the *New York Review of Books.* It's okay to discuss it. The interesting question is: Why is it not anathema today when it was in the early 1970s?

Well, I can think of only one reason: back then, it was feasible—in fact, as I mentioned, it was not too remote from what military intelligence was proposing, and therefore it had to be killed. But today, talking about one state is like saying, "Let's be peaceful." So if you want to say that, fine, say it. But in my mind the only function today of that discussion today is to undercut the steps that can be taken to achieve the two-state as a stage. In other words, to torch that solution. I mean, unless someone has another idea—and I have yet to see it—of how you get to a binational state, or call it one-state if you like, until someone has an idea of how to do that without going through several intermediate stages, I think it's at the level of "let's beat our swords into ploughshares."

South Africa and BDS [Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions] are often proposed as models.

Well, we've already discussed South Africa. As for BDS, it's a fine tactic. In fact, I was involved in it before the movement even started. So sure,

it's fine to have properly formulated BDS tactics, with the emphasis on "properly formulated." It also needs to be understood that in the case of South Africa, by the time there were beginning to be serious sanctions in the early 1980s there was already virtually no support for apartheid. American corporations were opposed, Europe was opposed, the whole world was opposed, and just the Reagan administration managed to evade them. But all that was after a long educational period in which apartheid had lost its support. There's nothing like that happening in the case of Israel—nothing that will create the background for sanctions as a feasible policy beyond a gesture.

You mean that there's no serious educational campaign?

Yes. Getting people to understand what's going on there. It's beginning to happen, but it's so far short of the South Africa case that it's really not even an analogy. Nevertheless, I think it's a good tactic, but here you have to be careful. BDS is a tactic, not a principle, so you always have to ask: Is this particular instance of it a good tactic or a bad tactic?

There are forms of BDS that are quite appropriate: for example, anything targeting U.S. support for the occupation, first for its potential policy impact and second for education. It directs people's attention to the fact that we're participating in the occupation and that it's our job to end it. It's easy if you want to just say, "Look, Israel is a terrible place, look how bad they are," but there are no policy consequences, and it misdirects people. If you want policy to change, people here are going to have to understand that we're participating in it. So opposing Motorola developments in the occupied territories or boycotting products from the occupied territories—anything like that makes perfect sense.

But even better than this, I think, would be to adopt the Amnesty International program, which is to push for the cancellation of arms deliveries to Israel because they're illegal under international law; we can expand that in this country because they're also illegal under U.S. law. The Arms Export Act is very explicit that the arms must be used for either defense or internal security. This is not what they are being used for, transparently. Okay, so let's put pressure on the American government to stop arms delivery, to stop any support for the IDF in the occupied territories. These are all perfectly feasible programs. I think that is a strong position to take which can reach people.

Do you think those are feasible objectives?

It's something to organize on. It's like organizing against apartheid in the 1960s. It took a long time, but it worked because people did turn against apartheid. These are very good tactics; they have policy implications, they're educational. There are other kinds of tactics, which have

backfired, predictably, because they are just too hypocritical, such as boycotting Tel Aviv University. The problem with that is that U.S. institutions, like Harvard or MIT, are implicated in far worse activities.

Finally, you have made the argument that a two-state settlement is attainable and that it only makes sense as a way station to a binational outcome.

I am only expressing what I think *ought* to happen. I believe that if the two-state solution were established in a sensible form, the borders would pretty soon break down: commercial relations would increase, cultural relations would increase, personal interactions would increase. You know, sports, dance troupes, orchestras, whatever, would increase, and sooner or later it would be recognized that these boundaries are unviable.

But there's an alternative scenario, which is that such a settlement, emerging in the context of the current policy of separation, would actually see even less interaction.

That would be unfortunate, but I still think it would be better than the current situation, given where it seems clearly to be heading. And we haven't even mentioned Gaza. The U.S.-Israeli policy since Oslo has been directed toward separating Gaza from the West Bank.

Which has largely succeeded.

Unfortunately, but I think a proper two-state settlement would overcome that. It won't be easy, even within the Palestinian community, as you know better than I, but that should be the goal of the interim settlement. And it *is* the international consensus. After all, the Oslo agreements themselves say that this is a territorial unity that cannot be broken up.

But under current circumstances, isn't there a real threat that a two-state settlement, if and when one is achieved, will no longer symbolize the end of occupation as people had originally assumed, but actually would become a mechanism for perpetuating Israeli control?

Undoubtedly, if there were a two-state settlement roughly in accord with the international consensus, Israel would be far more powerful. But an appropriate two-state settlement, I think, would have to be along the lines, roughly, of the near-agreement in Taba and the Geneva proposals. In other words, one-to-one land swaps. I mean, the Geneva proposals, whether we accept them or not, include the transfer to Palestine of substantial parts of valuable land in Israel: arable and important land bordering Gaza, for example, which would be added on. Well, you know, I don't think it's beautiful, but I think it's better than what there

is now and it could be a step to go on. I don't know of any other, that's the important fact.

Yet in taking this position, if anything you're forced to endure continual sniping from the opposite direction, if you will.

Not from the opposite direction. It's from the same direction, because the people who are proposing a one-state settlement without rising to the level of advocacy are in fact serving the opponent, the occupation. That is why it's acceptable now to write "Let's have a one-state settlement" in the *New York Review of Books*, whereas in the early '70s it was intolerable for you to say "Let's move in the direction of a federation." I think it is recognized now that pushing for the one-state settlement is actually helping to undermine what would have to be the first stage in reaching that goal, which is a two-state settlement. If there's an alternative, I'm open to it, but I need to see it.