

Beyond Dissidence

Interview

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

What do you think about Israel's assault on the Gaza Strip? What might be done in order to achieve a peaceful solution to the conflict between Israel and Palestine?

The US-Israeli attack on Gaza was a savage and brutal war crime. The term US- Israeli is accurate. Israel relied on US weapons, in violation of US, as well as international, law, and the US provided crucial diplomatic and ideological support. The diplomatic support included blocking UN efforts to bring the conflict to an end. The ideological support included overwhelming votes in Congress supporting the aggression, and almost universal agreement that it was justified, even if, perhaps, disproportionate.

In fact, the attack was completely without justification. The way this issue is framed — by President Obama and virtually everyone else — is that Israel had a right to defend itself against Hamas rockets. But that is not the issue at all.

The issue is whether Israel had a right to defend itself by force against rockets. It is universally agreed that force can be used only when peaceful means are exhausted. No one believes that the Nazis had the right to use force in defence against the terror of the partisans.

In this case peaceful means had not even been tried. A narrow choice would have been for Israel to accept a ceasefire, which in fact it has never done. To take only the most recent case, a ceasefire was declared in June 2008. Israel did not adhere to it: it maintained the harsh siege, which is an act of war, even preventing the UN humanitarian mission UNRWA from replenishing its stores, "so when the ceasefire broke down, we ran out of food for the 750,000 who depend on us," UNRWA Director John Ging reported. Nevertheless, Hamas scrupulously observed the ceasefire. Israeli government spokesman Mark Regev conceded that Hamas had not fired a single rocket until after Israel invaded the Gaza Strip on 4 November, under the cover of the US elections, and killed six Palestinians. Israel rejected additional ceasefire proposals from Hamas virtually until the day of the attack.

More broadly, Israel could have ceased its criminal activities in the other part of Palestine, the West Bank. Until they do that they cannot object to resistance. Within the West Bank resistance is impossible. In fact, the US-run Palestinian military forces were able to suppress even expression of support for Palestinians being slaughtered in Gaza, and they are greatly praised for that achievement by leading Democratic liberals close to the Obama administration, like Senator John Kerry, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

☒ Virtually everything Israel does in the occupied territories is criminal, and the Israeli

government knows it. Immediately after the 1967 war Israel was informed by its highest legal authorities that the Geneva Conventions apply to the occupied territories, so that any transfer of population there is illegal. Defence Minister Moshe Dayan conceded that settlement violated international law, but added that “there is nothing new in that, so we will continue.” The Security Council has repeatedly condemned these actions, including those now taking place in Jerusalem. In 2004 the World Court reaffirmed that the Geneva Conventions apply. The US Justice Department agreed, in a separate declaration. The criminality extends to most of what Israel does in the occupied territories, always with firm US military, diplomatic, economic and ideological support.

In brief, Israel had ample opportunity to employ peaceful means, so that there was no justification whatsoever for the US- Israeli attack.

As for what should be done, that is very clear. For 35 years there has been a very broad international consensus on a political settlement: a two-state settlement on the internationally recognised borders, perhaps with “minor and mutual modifications”, in the words of official US policy pre-1971, before the US broke with world opinion on this matter. Since that time the US has blocked the consensus, and still does, including Barack Obama. There has been one break in this rejectionist stand. After the Camp David negotiations broke down in 2000, President Clinton recognised that no Palestinians could accept the US-Israeli terms, and proposed his “parameters”: somewhat vague, but more forthcoming. He then stated that both sides had accepted the parameters, and both had expressed reservations. The two sides met in Taba, Egypt in January 2001, and came very close to an agreement. In their final press conference, they said that with a little more time they might have resolved all of the issues. The negotiations were called off prematurely by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and never officially resumed. Much has changed since 2001 but the essentials remain: if a US president were willing to accept a diplomatic settlement, it could be achieved. The international consensus is by no means perfect, but it would be a great improvement over the current situation, and could be a stage towards something better for both Jews and Palestinians.

In a recent interview published in Znet you made an extraordinary comment on the current financial crisis and capitalism, arguing that “capitalism can’t end because it never started”. Why has neo-liberalism resulted, especially in the US and some EU countries, with state intervention in the economy? And what risks now face developing countries like Turkey?

✖ First we have to dismantle illusions about state intervention in the economy. In the US, as in other advanced economies, the economy relies very heavily on the dynamic state sector for innovation, development, procurement, bail outs, and many other methods. Take what we are now using: computers and the Internet. They were developed largely in the state sector, for decades, before they became a source of private profit in the market. That is not an exception, it is the norm. What is novel in the present crisis is the scale of state intervention, in particular to subsidise the financial institutions, although such intervention is also familiar from the past. One basic principle of what is called capitalism is that the public pays the costs and takes the risks while profit is privatised.

It is true that the very shallow intellectual foundations of the neo-liberal era have collapsed, in particular, the mythical efficient market hypothesis — the belief that by some miracle markets will take care of problems that arise. Of course, the principle was never adopted by the rich for themselves. Ronald Reagan has been anointed the high priest of free markets. In

the real world, he was by far the most protectionist US president in post-war US history, called upon the Pentagon to instruct backward US management in advanced Japanese-style production techniques, and in other ways acted to ensure the wealth and power of the private sector. Obama is doing the same. Simon Johnson, former chief economist of the IMF, is quite right when he criticises the Obama administration for following the dictates of Wall Street, acting to ensure that the institutions that created the crisis remain intact. Obama's chief advisers include those who share primary responsibility for the crisis, as the business press and others have observed. More independent voices, including Nobel Laureates in economics, have been excluded.

Though the crisis broke out in the US it quickly became global. The US will not emerge unscathed, but it may well be strengthened relative to its major competitors, the European Union and Japan. China and India are a separate matter.

What do you think about the election of Obama? Will US policies change radically?

My own expectation, based on Obama's record and his campaign, was that he would be a familiar centrist Democrat who would draw back from the most extreme Bush policies and try to remedy the serious damage that Bush did to US standing in the world, in part by a change of rhetoric, in part by some small gestures. That is a fair summary of what has happened so far.

A few weeks ago you joined those intellectuals criticising Human Rights Watch's report on Venezuela, saying it "does not meet even the most minimal standards of scholarship, impartiality, accuracy, or credibility". What do you see as the future of human rights?

The authors of the report were leading Latin American scholars. I agreed with its basic thrust and signed. There has been a vigorous debate online between HRW and the authors since. I think the essential criticism is accurate. Human rights organisations have generally played a very beneficial role: with regard to Turkey, for example, where the HRW representative, Jonathan Sugden, carried out extremely important and honourable work, I was able to appreciate this on the scene (he has since been expelled). But there are occasions when they have been much too influenced by pressures coming from funders and the great powers, particularly the US.

I do not see what question one can raise about human rights as a concept: it should be among our highest goals to struggle for the realisation of human rights.

You are a prominent philosopher, well known as a father of modern linguistics, on the one hand, and a leading political and public figure widely known for your views on world politics on the other. How do you view the responsibilities of intellectuals? Is being dissident enough?

✖ The term intellectual is used generally to refer to people with privilege and access to resources who engage in commentary on human affairs. It does not necessarily correlate with insight or understanding. In general, privilege confers responsibility: in particular, responsibility to seek the truth and to meet ethical standards. History reveals that, by and large, intellectuals have been servants of power, radically violating these responsibilities. There are always independent minds that confront the crimes of the powerful and seek to support the victims. They are usually punished in one or another way, depending on the nature of the society. That pattern goes back to the earliest historical records, and persists

with rare exceptions, as is easily shown. Contemporary Turkey is one of the striking exceptions. In Turkey leading writers, artists, journalists, academics, publishers and others have taken an unusually strong and courageous stand against the crimes of state and in support of the victims, and many have suffered severely for their honesty. And they have gone far beyond being dissident: they have engaged in courageous and honourable civil disobedience. It was a great privilege for me to be able to take part briefly in some of their activities. But this is rare. I will not run through my personal activities in the US and elsewhere in the past 40 years, but they go far beyond dissidence. Much more significant is the fact that the same is true, often far more so, for a great many people who remain unknown but who deserve most of the credit for progress towards justice and peace over the years.

You have argued that consent in the status quo is a media product. How do you reconcile your criticism of the media with your presence within it?

The role of the media in manufacturing consent is very well documented. The phrase, incidentally, is not mine. It is taken from the essays on democracy by Walter Lippmann, the leading American public intellectual of the 20th century, a Wilson- Roosevelt progressive. Lippmann described the “manufacture of consent” as an innovation in the “art of democracy”. He recommended these methods. They should be used, he wrote, to control the “ignorant and meddlesome outsiders” — the general population — whose “function” in a democracy is to be “spectators”, not “participants” in making and implementing decisions. That is a standard theme among elite intellectuals from widely varying sociopolitical systems.

Like other dissidents I have virtually no access to mainstream media in the US or the West generally.

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