

Homi Bhabha Talks with Noam Chomsky

Noam Chomsky

The Palestinian Past

HOMI BHABHA: Did you have many conversations with Edward Said? I mean, did you participate in any conferences or the like, and can you recall something of the feelings between you?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Edward Said and I were very close friends, but like most of my friends I barely see them, we're just too busy. So I didn't see Edward a lot, we didn't meet frequently. But we met often enough, and in interesting situations, and some of them were ones nobody ever talked about. It started in the late 1970s. Edward became very much concerned about the direction the PLO was taking. Which was highly self-destructive. In fact, it was the most self-destructive national liberation movement I've had anything to do with, and I've had to do with plenty of them. But I think partly it was they were coming out of some kind of a feudal background, which made them incapable of understanding the way a democratic society works. Every Third World movement, I mean even the North Koreans, crazy as they are, recognized that they better try to develop some support in the United States, otherwise they were in deep trouble. I mean, you can't look at the world and not understand that. The only ones who *never* understood it were the PLO. And for them it would have been easier than anyone else. I mean, if Arafat, Farouq Qadooni, and the rest of them had showed up in the 1970s, telling people the truth, the truth being I'm a conservative nationalist and I'd like to get elected mayor in my own city so I can rip people off and put the money in the bank. [Laughing.] And our own people would like to be able to elect their own mayors—which happened to be the truth. If they had come and told

that to people, they would have been extremely popular and everyone would have said, yes, that makes perfect sense, we'll support you. They wouldn't. What they had to do was come with a Kalashnikov, pretending to be Marxist revolutionaries, of which they understood not a word. And, in fact, you know, they brag about the fact that they're recognized by the Fiji Islands, so on and so forth. Of course, that just alienates people. And this was going on constantly, made it extremely hard to develop the kinds of solidarity movements that did develop and were effective in Indochina and in Central America and, finally, East Timor, and places like that. They just couldn't do it. And sometimes it was outlandish. Edward was involved seriously in trying to change this. Just to give you an illustration. At the time of the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, one of the most distinguished figures in the Israeli military, one of the founders of the army, a very honest man, incidentally, a person of really great integrity and honor, when he went to Lebanon he was too old to fight in the war, but he went as a civil advisor or something. And he was appalled by what the Israeli army was doing. He wrote a book in Hebrew called—it translates as *War Diary*, which was just his diary describing what was done. Well. I asked a small press here, South End Press, if they would agree to publish it and the translation of it, and we got somebody to translate it, and they were going to do it, but they didn't have any resources. I asked Edward to see if he could get the PLO—and not to subsidize it—but just to help in the distribution, to buy copies and put them in libraries and things like that because otherwise nobody would ever see it. But they didn't do it. They answered him back that they would do it only if it said, stamped on the front, "Published with the support of the PLO." You know what that's going to do with a book. But this conception that you somehow have to reach out to all, you have to reach out—they would never understand that. Edward tried to change that. We had meetings, which I don't think would have been discussed, around the late seventies or the early eighties, people who were highly sympathetic to the Palestinians, but then critical of the PLO. I recall meetings when the PLO delegation came to the UN; Edward arranged for us to have private meetings. I mean their conception of politics is a meeting in a back room with Henry Kissinger working out some kind of a deal, and that's not the way it works in a democratic society. You have to have popular support, and it will ultimately influence

NOAM CHOMSKY is Institute Professor (retired) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he has been on the faculty since 1955. He has written and lectured widely on linguistics, philosophy, intellectual history, and international affairs. Among his recent books are *Middle East Illusions* and *Hegemony or Survival*.

government policy. If you're talking to Henry Kissinger or, you know, George Shultz in the back room, they're going to be representing their interests, not your interests.

Binational State

HB: What do you think of Edward's desire for a binational state, which seemed to be at once utopian and utterly necessary?

NC: I was writing about this from 1967 up till 1973, writing extensively, and I think, at that time, it was a sensible idea. After the Israeli conquest of the territories, Israel was in a position to basically settle the problem. By 1971, Egypt was offering a full peace treaty and offered nothing to the Palestinians. Jordan was willing to settle, a full peace treaty, and Israel understood that. They knew these were genuine peace offers. They rejected them because they wanted to expand into Sinai.

But suppose they had accepted the Egyptian offer, which essentially would have ended the interstate conflict, and, of course, accepted Jordan's offer. Well, then they would have been left with the West Bank. What should they have done? Well, in my opinion, what they should have done, from their own point of view, was to establish a federal system in cis-Jordan with a Jewish-based area and a Palestinian-based area. It just makes no sense to break that region up into two worlds. All you have to do is travel around it. Because of the border, it wouldn't make any sense. They are integrated in all kinds of ways. Any Jewish state or Palestinian state is going to be discriminatory, just like any Christian state or, you know, white state or anything else. That's, more or less, unavoidable, but you can attenuate the discriminatory character by federal integration.

And over time, as other forms of connections and as people develop—after all, we're not just Jews and Palestinians; there are class relations, intellectual relations, professional relations, as further circumstances permit—you can end up with closer integration. Well, at that time, it was a very sensible proposal and it would have saved plenty of misery and turmoil—if it had been carried out, but you couldn't, nobody knew how. No Palestinians wanted to hear it. No Israeli wanted to hear it. It was a mess. I did write about it a lot. It's one of the reasons why I'm so hated. By 1973, it was finished. So that once the U.S. and Israel refused to accept Sadat's offer it virtually compelled Sadat to go to war. After the war, even Kissinger understood that you can't just dismiss the Egyptians. He doesn't understand much, but he understands force. And the Egyptians said, "Look, we're not a basket case, so we can't be dismissed." And at that point the United States moved towards what ultimately was the Camp David agreements, which essentially accepted Sadat's 1971 offer. Now that's presented in the United States as a dramatic triumph. It's, in

fact, a diplomatic catastrophe. By rejecting the offer in 1971, they created a situation where there was a terrible war, a lot of suffering, even a nuclear alert. And then, finally, they came around accepting something like Sadat's original offer. Of course, you can't say that. So you have to present it differently. However, by the midseventies, the issue of a binational federal state was gone because by that time the international consensus had taken shape for the first time, and it was taking shape around the two-state settlement. In January of 1976, there was a Security Council resolution on it, which the U.S. vetoed and from then on the issue was a two-state settlement. Personally, I thought it was a bad idea, but, given that there was no alternative, I went along with it, too. The possibility of a binational federal system was essentially gone.

I talked to Edward about it a lot. He was strongly in favor of the two-state settlement, and I couldn't disagree with him, given the possibilities. In fact, we agreed about that completely. As for the Oslo process, Edward and I thought the same things. It was a complete sellout on Arafat's part, it was perfectly obvious. Palestinians couldn't see it. In fact, right after, just to show how extreme it was, right after the Oslo agreement was signed in September 1993, I actually wrote about it right away; I said it was a total sellout. But there was a meeting here at MIT that included a leading Palestinian. I can't identify him. But he was from Israel and a Palestinian, a friend, a personal friend. We talked at the meeting and I said what I thought. And we went out for coffee afterwards, and he told me he didn't disagree but that if I tried to say that on the streets of Ramallah I'd be lynched because they wanted desperately to believe the Oslo agreement. It's not uncommon, you know; people who are really suffering want to have hope. And even when they're being kicked in the face, they prefer to believe something else. And the truth is hard to face. But the truth was it was a complete sellout. Arafat undermined the genuine authentic Palestinian leadership, which had been negotiating in Washington, but refused to give up on the issue of the settlements.

The Right of Return

HB: And the right to return issue?

NC: And the issue of the refugees—here I strongly disagree with my Palestinian friends, close friends. I have felt for years and I've been trying to tell them for years something very unpopular: you cannot hold out false hopes in front of the refugees. The people who are suffering miserably in refugee camps in Lebanon, it's just not honest and not moral to tell them you have hope of returning to your homes because they don't. First of all, there is no international support for it. And under the unimaginable circumstances that there would be international support, Israel would

use the ultimate weapon to prevent it, even if that required using lethal weapons to blow up their region. What they used to call the Samson complex back from the 1950s. If they were forced to accept the bringing of the Palestinians back, they would prevent it by any means possible. But, furthermore, the issue is not going to arise because there's never going to be any support for it. You know, they could be assimilated, but it's meaningless, it's just not going to happen, and we know it's not going to happen. Now it could happen over a course of evolution through two states, integrating them, federal, you know, moving on to some new state. Then, it could possibly happen, but it can't be part of the short-term settlement. I must say I disagree with almost all of my friends on this. I mean, opposing the Geneva accords on those grounds, I don't think makes sense. In fact, you can kind of trace it. At the time of the Taba negotiations in January of 2001, there was a considerable improvement over Camp David, considerable, not enough, but considerable. The Geneva accords is a bigger improvement. The Taba negotiations were never continued. I mean they were continued *sub rosa*, the Geneva accords, but not openly. They were blocked, Sharon was elected. It was easy for him to block them because of the suicide bombings. You know, people are driven to desperation, to make and say terrible things. But, as a tactic, it was senseless. And I've been saying this for thirty-five years. The first article—one of the first articles I wrote was actually for a Palestinian audience, around 1969—basically told my Palestinian friends that the PLO tactics are senseless. If you carry out acts that are unacceptable on moral grounds to any decent person, you're not going to get any support, and you shouldn't get any support. First of all, it was morally outrageous, and it was politically idiotic. I mean Israel was moving to the borders. It was pushing to the borders the Mizrahim—you know, the Jews from the Arab countries and they were poor working-class people. Those are the ones the PLO carried out the terror on. What kind of political idiocy, apart from any moral level, is it to attack poor Jews from the Arab countries and kill them? That's going to win you some support somewhere?

A Hopeful Future

HB: Finally, do you see a cadre of more positive leadership, more moral leadership on the Palestinian side?

NC: Very good people, the people who were Edward's friends, like . . .

HB: Barghouti. And will they be able to break through? What are the conditions? Just one or two things that would allow them to actually break through and carry popular solidarity on both sides?

NC: Well, they have to work in their own communities. But what is lacking and what is crucial is anything in the United States. Like, when the in-

tifada began. Let me just give you an explicit incident to show how it really works in many cases. When this second intifada began, the first few days, actually the first month of the intifada, the killing ratio was twenty to one, twenty Palestinians to one Jew. And they were Israeli soldiers. Nobody cared about it here. As long as it was twenty to one, who cares? When it got down to three to one, it became a tragedy. But the first couple of days of the intifada, Israel was using helicopters—meaning American helicopters, they don't make them—to attack civilian targets, killing and wounding dozens of people. It was actually being reported. After three days of the intifada, on October third, Clinton made the biggest deal in a decade to send new military helicopters to Israel. Right at the very moment when these helicopters were being used to attack, murderously to attack civilian targets. It wasn't reported here. A couple of us tried very hard to get it reported. Actually, I went to the offices of the *Boston Globe* with a group of people to try to convince the editors to just publish the facts. You don't have to say anything about it, just allow it to appear in public. It was in the Israeli press and it was in the international press. It was on international wires. So, as long as the United States stands in the way, there will be no political settlement. Its force is just far too great. And unless there's some kind of a solidarity movement here, say, let's take some of these nonviolent resistance actions going on right at this moment, they could succeed. You know, they could be the basis for a settlement. But not if they're totally blocked here.

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