

Noam Chomsky on the State of the U.S. Empire

Christopher Helali



Christopher Helali with Prof. Noam Chomsky at his office at MIT, March 12th, 2013

Noam Chomsky is Institute Professor (emeritus) in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Laureate Professor of Linguistics and Agnese Nelms Haury Chair in the Program in Environment and Social Justice at the University of Arizona. Considered the founder of modern linguistics, Prof. Chomsky's work is widely credited with having revolutionized the field of modern linguistics. Additionally, he is one of the most cited scholars in modern history, having written over 100 books. He has received numerous awards, including the Kyoto Prize in Basic Sciences, the Helmholtz

Medal, and the Ben Franklin Medal in Computer and Cognitive Science. Prof. Chomsky remains one of the most vocal and outspoken activists and public intellectuals in the United States. A fierce critic of US foreign policy, he has written many books covering US imperialism, foreign policy, and anarchism. His books include *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, with Edward S. Herman (Pantheon, 1988); *Rogue States: The Rule of Force in World Affairs* (South End Press, 2000); *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky* (The New Press, 2002); *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (Metropolitan Books, 2003); *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate: On Human Nature*, with Michel Foucault (The New Press, 2006); *On Anarchism* (The New Press, 2013); *Gaza in Crisis: Reflections on the US-Israeli War Against the Palestinians*, with Ilan Pappé (Haymarket Books, 2013); *On Palestine*, with Ilan Pappé (Haymarket Books, 2015); *Who Rules the World?* (Metropolitan Books, 2016); and *On Western Terrorism: From Hiroshima to Drone Warfare*, with Andre Vltchek (Pluto Press, 2017).

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In the Spring of 2013, while I was a graduate student at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology and Harvard Divinity School, I reached out to Prof. Noam Chomsky via email to request an interview. He happily accepted. On March 12th, 2013, I entered his office at MIT and sat down with him for nearly an hour.¹ A large photo of the philosopher Bertrand Russell towered over us and piles of books and papers surrounded us. Since 2013, Prof. Chomsky and I have kept in touch via email, and I was able to see him on numerous occasions in the Boston area. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I reached out to him for a follow up interview and once again, he graciously accepted. Even in his early 90s, Prof. Chomsky continues to sharply criticize US foreign policy as well as addressing the more existential threats of the climate emergency and nuclear weapons. The following is an edited interview with Prof.

¹ Noam Chomsky, “Noam Chomsky on Revolutionary Violence, Communism and the American Left,” by Christopher Helali, *Pax Marxista*, March 12, 2013, <https://chomsky.info/20130312/>.

Chomsky from April 19th, 2021, where we talk about Syria and the Kurdish question, imperialism, China, the Black Panther Party, and if Prof. Chomsky has any regrets.²

CH: It is a pleasure and honor to speak to you once again, Professor Chomsky. Last time I interviewed you was in 2013. So, it's been quite a while and a lot has happened. As you know, I fought with the YPG in 2017 against ISIS in northeast Syria. Today, the United States is still illegally occupying northeast Syria while imposing brutal sanctions on the Syrian people. What is your perspective on Syria and the Kurdish question?

NC: Well, the United States pretty much abandoned the Kurds in Rojava after they had served the purpose of the United States. [They] had provided basically the ground forces for driving out ISIS and suffered over 10,000 killed. Then President Trump just told them to get lost and handed them over to the Turks, their most bitter enemy, who proceeded to move in and drive them out and slaughter them. They're holding out for the time being.

The sanctions on Syria are brutal and destructive. Sanctions generally attack the civilian population. They have no effect on the leadership. They're murderous and brutal. That's what sanctions are like. The sanctions on Iraq, for example, devastated the country. [They] didn't harm Saddam Hussein, and his coterie, in fact, it probably strengthened them because the population had to rely on them for survival. In fact, they might have been overthrown from within if it hadn't been for the sanctions. Well, we're seeing that again in Syria, as we see it in other places. It's a horrible situation. It's hard to see anything good, almost anywhere.

² Thanks to Roderic Day of *Red Sails* (<https://redsails.org/>) who provided some ideas regarding this interview in January 2021.



Guerrillas of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) with AK-47s surrounded by YPG, PKK, and Kurdish flags. Some of the PKK flags depict Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned founder and leader of the PKK.

CH: Thinking of the state of the U.S. empire today and the anti-imperialist movement, do you have a theory of imperialism? What does imperialism mean for you today? Is anti-imperialism still relevant?

NC: These general terms of political theory are really not terribly useful. It doesn't make sense to try to define them. You can look at particular cases and describe them, figure out what the factors are. What term you decide to use for them isn't all that important. The current stage of American global domination has many factors, many. One of them, concerning Syria in the Middle East region, is the one significant geostrategic initiative that was undertaken by the Trump administration and so far, is being pursued by Biden. Trump, he probably didn't know it but whoever was planning for him, had the idea of constructing a reactionary international, of the most reactionary states in the world run from Washington.

In the Middle East that would include the family dictatorships of the Gulf, Israel, which has moved very far to the right, and any other right wing extreme forces that they could find. Moving to the East, includes Modi's India. Modi's busy crushing Kashmir, destroying Indian secular democracy. Obvious candidate in the western hemisphere is the proto-fascist, destructive tyrant Bolsonaro in Brazil. Orban in Hungary and a couple of others.

The main target is Iran, not because of the ugliness of the state, which indeed is very ugly but the US tolerates the same or worse elsewhere. But because Iran is the one country in the region which is not succumbing to U.S. power and that can't be tolerated. Therefore, it's an enemy that has to be destroyed. When Israel talks about Iran being an existential threat, and that's echoed in the US media commentary, what that means is Iran is a deterrent to Israel's initiatives to rampage freely in the region. Iran is in the way. Actually, US intelligence says the same thing about Iran. They say the threat of Iran is that it's a deterrent. If Iran were to develop nuclear weapons, according to US intelligence, they would be part of its deterrence strategy. Of course, they're not going to use them, in which case they'd be wiped out in three seconds. But they are a deterrent, and countries that want to rampage freely don't want to tolerate deterrence. So, Iran is an enemy and has to be destroyed.

Looking around the world, it's a dangerous situation. The Biden administration has had pretty reasonable domestic policies, better than I expected, but on foreign policy, it's very dangerous. They have undertaken unnecessary, provocative actions where diplomacy is in order with regard to China and Russia. Biden has basically continued Trump's policy with regard to Iran. Some nicer words but the policy is the same. The US pulled out of the joint agreement in violation of Security Council orders, but it's Iran's responsibility to initiate a return. Biden, following Trump, says the return must be to a new agreement, not the joint agreement, but a much harsher one. Essentially, Trump's policy. That's leading to very serious threats and dangers, which could be easily dealt with.

In other areas, there is a problem in the South China Sea. Undoubtedly, China is undertaking actions which are in violation of international court decisions. They're trying to establish in the seas off their coast, what the United States establishes all over the world. Of course, the US doesn't want to accept that. It wants total control, not just control of the Eastern Pacific, but also the South China Sea. So, there's a conflict. The answer to the conflict is not to send a naval armada into the South China Sea, but to move towards negotiations and diplomacy to try to work it out together with the other countries in the region who would much prefer a diplomatic settlement than a war which would destroy everyone.

The provocative actions with Russia are similar. Not that Russia is blameless by any means, but the answer is not more provocation on the Russian border. Biden has

done some good things. He managed to salvage the new START agreement. Russia had been calling for negotiations to resolve and continue the last of the arms control regime. Trump managed to destroy all the rest of it, but one part was left, the new START agreement, which limits the number of missiles. It's mostly symbolic, but important. Biden did rescue it literally within hours of its expiration. It was due to expire on February 5th (2021). So that was good. But in foreign policy, it's hard to find anything else. I mean, he has eliminated some of the more savage and brutal, gratuitously brutal, elements of Trump's policies, like punishing the Palestinians in Gaza who were barely surviving. According to Trump, you have to punish them by taking away the little support they have because they weren't grateful enough to him for selling Palestinians down the river. Okay, Biden relaxed on that now. Restored some of the aid from before, so it's less savage, less brutal, but not very different.

CH: In 2015 I was honored to see you and Dr. Mads Gilbert together at MIT speaking on Palestine. Since then, so much has changed and worsened for the Palestinians. What is your perspective on Palestine today? Is the two-state solution still viable or do we have to envision some other alternative, like a one-state solution?

NC: Well, I've been in favor of a one-state solution all my life, but it's not enough to be in favor of it. It has to be feasible. At the moment, it's just not an option. Israel will never agree to go out of existence and become a minority Jewish population in a Palestinian state. Just simple as that. If they had to, they would use nuclear weapons to prevent it. It's just not an option. What you can do is begin to move towards some sort of integration of the societies. But the problem with that is Israel doesn't want it. Israel is dedicated to the Greater Israel policy [*Eretz Yisrael Ha-Shlema*] that has been pursued relentlessly for over 50 years. The idea is to take over in the West Bank everything of any value and leave the population to somehow survive if they can. So actually, Israel doesn't want to take over Nablus, doesn't want Palestinian population concentrations, wants to get rid of the Palestinians, not to incorporate them. So, it doesn't take Nablus, it doesn't take Tulkarm. Palestinians everywhere are left in about 160 isolated enclaves surrounded by checkpoints cut off from their fields and olive

groves and pasture. If they can survive somehow it's their business, or otherwise just leave.

That's the policy, and it's not hidden. You can see it right in front of your eyes. The Israeli settlers in Ma'ale Adumim, right in the middle of the West Bank, don't even know they're in Palestine. They think they're in Israel. They get subsidized housing, health care, even better than living in Israel because they get their housing and maintenance subsidized. They ride on superhighways to their jobs in Tel Aviv. They wouldn't even know there's a Palestinian around. That's the policy that's being implemented. Meanwhile, they sort of dangle two states as an option, but one state is just not an option.

Now the hope for the Palestinians, I think, is actually in the United States. If the United States were to change its policies even slightly, that would have a big effect and it could happen. What's happening in the United States is interesting to see. It's important. You go back to 10 or 15 years, support for Israel was the darling of the liberal community. You could say no wrong about Israel. Couldn't even give talks about it. Meetings would be broken up, needed police protection, that sort of thing. That's all changed. Liberal Americans now actually are more supportive of Palestinians than of Israel. Support for Israel has shifted to the far-right. It's based in the Republican Party, of course, in the evangelical community for the wrong reasons. Many of them anti-Semitic reasons. The far-right nationalists, the military industries, security industries and so on. Well, that could sooner or later lead to a change in policy. In fact, if there were serious activist groups in the United States working on this, I think the terrain is possible.

So, for example, there are real soft spots which the mainstream tries to cover up. I'll take you to Iran again. The Iranian nuclear program is supposed to be the biggest threat in the world. There is a very simple way of stopping them. Namely, institute a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East. Everybody's in favor of it. Iran is strongly in favor of it. The Arab states are in favor of it. Global south is in favor of it. Europe has no objections. The one barrier is the United States won't permit it. Obama vetoed it every time it came up. The reason is perfectly obvious. The United States does not want Israel's nuclear weapons to be inspected. In fact, the United States does not even officially recognize their existence. There is a reason for that too.

Under American law, U.S. aid to Israel is arguably illegal because of Israel's development of nuclear weapons outside the framework of international agreements. None of the political parties, neither of them wants to open that door. Mainstream commentators don't want to, either. But the American people would be concerned if they knew about that, all across the spectrum in fact. Plenty of say, my right-wing neighbors here in Arizona wouldn't like the idea of paying billions of dollars to Israel to conceal the fact that U.S. aid is illegal. There is plenty of room for activism on that. It's not being done. There are other things, they're just not being done. But it's an opportunity. Even a mild threat in the United States to reduce military aid would have a big impact. It could put some form of two-state settlement back on the agenda. It's not there now, but it could be. That could be a step towards the kind of interactions, erosion of borders, commercial cultural interactions, which could lead to a unitary Israel-Palestine, maybe a federation of some sort. I think those things are all conceivable.



Palestinian woman in Gaza wearing the traditional keffiyeh and thobe while holding a Palestinian flag

CH: Do you think there's a place for Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) in the struggle for Palestine?

NC: It could be if it were directed. The BDS movement could be important. The problem is that it's wedded to a catechism, and it cannot think tactically. There's a catechism handed down originally by Omar Barghouti, has three things, have to keep to those, can't think of anything else. So, you can't bring up what I just discussed because that's not in the catechism. Now, if you look at the catechism, part of it makes sense. Boycott. There are no sanctions, of course, but a boycott of anything related to the occupation is a very effective tactic. You can bring in lots of support. It's got a simple basis, even in international law. Overwhelming support. So, you focus on that, and you get somewhere. Soon as you bring up say, calling for all refugees to return, you're finished. Everyone knows it's not going to happen. Secondly, it just is a gift to the Zionist right wing. It says "Oh look, a bunch of anti-Semites who want to destroy Israel by letting hordes of Palestinians come in." I mean if you're a serious activist organization you don't pick tactics which are suicidal. It's as simple as that.

Saying the third element of the catechism, "we're going to boycott Israel until they have equal rights for Palestinians within Israel," actually, that's a good point. But it immediately directs attention away from the Palestinians because the reaction is predictable, and we've seen it over and over. Why single out Israel? Why not your own country, which has plenty of repression and violence? So, if you're singling out Israel it's because you're anti-Semitic? So, let's have rules blocking your activities because they're anti-Semitic. And the next thing is you fight the rules and so on. Meanwhile, forget about the Palestinians. It's a crazy tactic. I mean, you know, if you want to get somewhere, you adjust your tactics, so they're going to work. Not so that they're going to undermine your efforts.

So, I think the boycott of anything connected with the occupation makes very good sense. That was actually initiated in the 1990s by Uri Avnery and his Gush Shalom organization in Israel. Some have picked it up. The Presbyterian Church, a major institution in the US does follow that. That makes sense. As long as the BDS movement does that, they're helpful. When they go in other directions, it's harmful. It moves attention away from the Palestinians to issues like academic freedom or hypocrisy or anti-Semitism. That's of no help to the Palestinians to move attention over in those directions. There are opportunities being lost like the one I mentioned, which could have a lot of appeal.

CH: Over the past few years, we have seen the United States unilaterally escalating tensions with China, most especially during the pandemic. Former President Trump referred to COVID-19 as the “China virus” and different far-right media outlets like the Epoch Times, continue to spew their hate as a new Cold War looms on the horizon. What is your perspective on China today?

NC: It's a repressive, authoritarian state. On major issues like global warming, it's a mixed story. It's always called the highest polluter in the world. That's not quite accurate. In per capita terms, which is the only relevant measure, it's way below the United States. But it's instituting more coal plants and shouldn't be doing that. On the other hand, it's way ahead internationally in renewable energy. Not only in scale, but even in quality and it's increasing. We should be cooperating with it on that. We should be cooperating with them on issues of common concern. One of them is global warming. It's an international issue. They have a mixed record. We have a mixed record. In fact, [we have] one of the worst records. We could get together with them to improve the global situation.

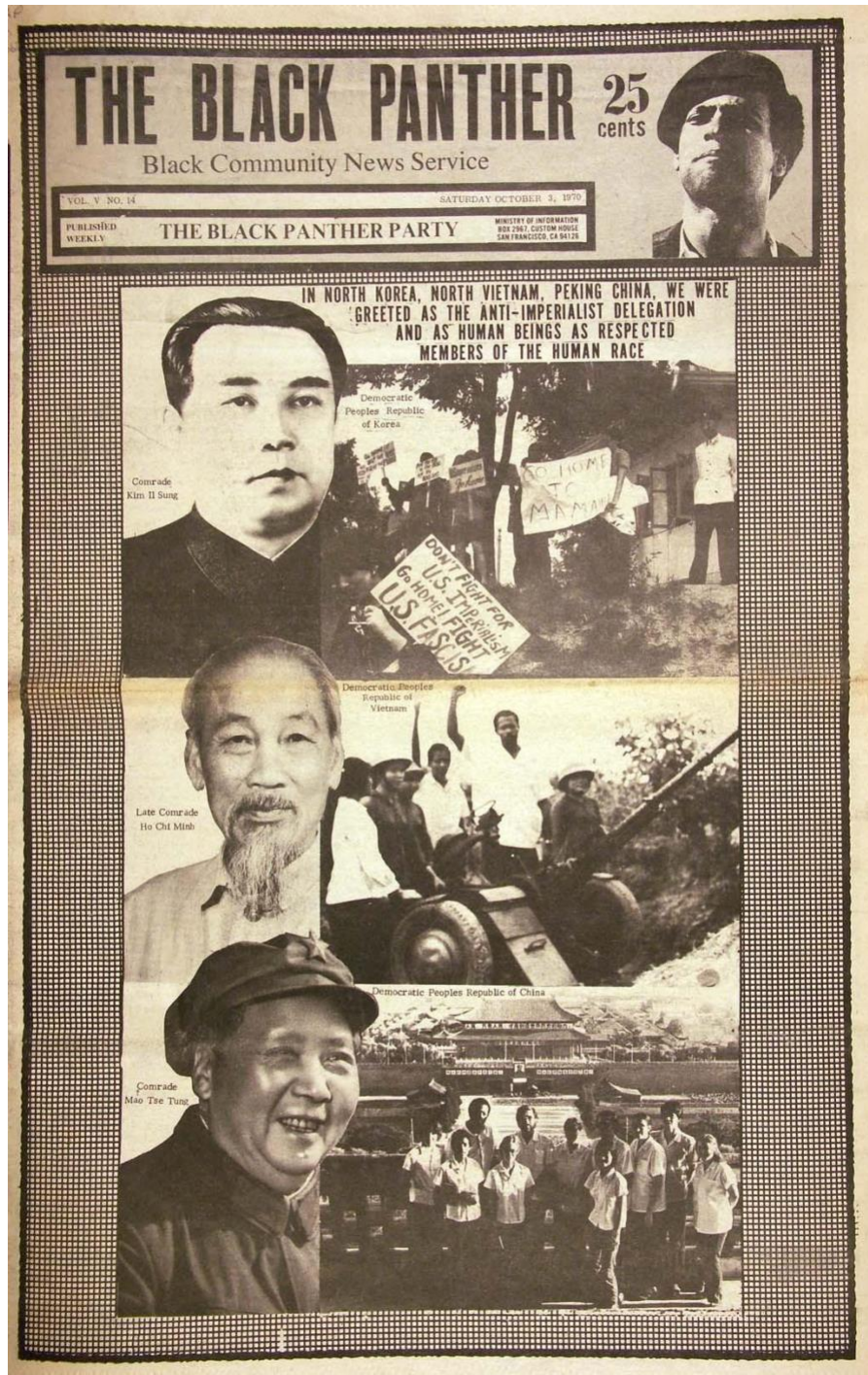
Same is true of international conflict. Take the major issue of repression, that's getting huge publicity in the United States. The reeducation camps for one million Uyghurs. That's clearly severe human rights abuses. But how about being honest about it? I mean, is the situation of the Uyghurs worse than the situation in Gaza. Two million Gazans, twice that many people facing virtual destruction. No potable water, Israeli attacks destroying sewage plants. Barely surviving under constant attack of one sort or another. The difference between that case and the Uyghur case is that we can do something about it. In fact, we could end it. In the case of the Uyghurs, we can complain about it. That's a very consistent pattern.

I've written reams about it. My colleague and friend, the late Ed Herman, did tons of work on it. Case after case of what we called the difference between worthy and unworthy victims. The worthy victims are the victims of someone else, an enemy that we can't do anything about. That's worthy victims. The unworthy victims are our victims, which we can do everything about. So therefore, you scream and lament about the other guy's crimes while you suppress your own. How much have you read about the fact that we could end the torture of Gaza, two million people have children,

if we wanted to. Can't find that in the newspapers. It's much better to express your outrage over the reeducation camps in China. So, what's the sense of China? A lot wrong, seriously wrong. A lot right. Take the COVID pandemic. I mean, you look at the total number of deaths in China. It's not much more than the daily deaths in the United States. I mean, they contained it. Maybe 5,000 deaths since the beginning, unlike other countries. Well, that's important. We want to know how they did it. You don't call it "Kung Flu" or "Chinese Flu." You try to work constructively with them. Not that there's a lovely government, it isn't. It's a harsh, repressive government. Okay, you work with it. Try to make things better.



Third Session of the 12th National People's Congress (2015).



Black Panther Party Newspaper (1970) highlighting the solidarity, proletarian internationalism, and anti-imperialism of Kim Il Sung, Ho Chi Minh, and Mao Zedong.

CH: I want to ask a historical question here, given the current movement for Black lives. What do you think of the historical legacy of the Black Panther Party

and specifically their embrace of democratic centralism and Marxism-Leninism?

NC: Well, the Black Panthers, who I actually worked with pretty closely back in those years, were a mixed story. Actually, there were very few Black Panthers. According to the FBI, there were eight hundred. They were a major target. The major target of FBI repression. In fact, they were wiped out by FBI repression and the FBI went after [them]. As I said, they were mixed. Some of them were serious organizers working in the community, doing very good things. Other members were basically thugs. Criminal elements making use of it. The FBI didn't care about the criminal elements. They went after the organizers, the good people. Sometimes they just murdered them like Fred Hampton in a Gestapo-style assassination. One of the most effective Panther organizers. They were under such attack and pressure that it's very hard to discuss what they could have been. They could have been a major important organization.

It was so-called Black nationalism altogether [that] was under very severe attack under the COINTELPRO monstrosities, the worst repression in American history. A program of the national political police to wipe out all criticism and dissent. In fact, the entire New Left, [including] the women's movement, was under attack. It concentrated on the Black population. Very destructive [and] demoralizing to the whole Black community. Well, Black Lives Matter has been very successful. They've done the right kinds of activism and organizing. They have enormous public support. Popular movements like that never get any public support. Even before the Floyd murder, Black Lives Matter had about 50 percent public support, which is incredible. After the killing of Floyd, it went up to about two thirds. That's way beyond what Martin Luther King had at the peak of his popularity. They're doing basically good things. They could turn into a successful movement. If they move towards centralized control, democratic centralism, they are going to become another authoritarian movement. It's built into the structure.

People like Rosa Luxemburg before her assassination were condemning the Bolsheviks for moving in that direction. It was critical support. She was supportive of what they were doing but warned that these Leninist moves towards centralization were going to wipe out democratic participation and the hopeful elements in the

revolutionary struggle. I see Trotsky had even condemned Lenin for that years earlier. In 1905, the left-wing of the Marxist movement, correctly, was quite critical of these centralizing moves. The kind of slogan that they used was “the party will take control over the proletariat, the central committee will take control over the party, and maximal leadership will take control over the central committee.” That’s what we see happening over and over. The Bolshevik Revolution was a case in point. I think these are the wrong directions to move in. The directions to move in should be participatory, democratic, moving towards freedom, mutual aid, mutual support. The constructive activities. Plenty of room for that.

***CH:* My final question, and I think that this is a good way to close, what is something political you once believed in strongly that you subsequently changed your mind about? Do you have any regrets?**

NC: Well, there's lots of regrets, but they're mostly waiting too long to do things and not doing enough. I mean, you know, maybe it's a bad personality trait, but my beliefs are not much changed since I was a teenager.

***CH:* Thank you for taking the time to speak to me. I wish you all the best. Stay healthy and safe.**

NC: Thank you very much. Good to talk to you.



Noam Chomsky and Christopher Helali on Zoom during the COVID-19 Pandemic, April 19, 2021.