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## **Noam Chomsky: Obama's Stance on Gaza Crisis "Approximately the Bush Position"**



In a visit to the State Department Thursday, President Obama made his first substantive comments on the Middle East conflict since Israel's attack on Gaza. Obama first mentioned his commitment to Israel's security, without affirming his commitment to Palestinian security. He condemned Palestinian rocket attacks on southern Israeli towns, but didn't criticize the US-backed Israeli bombings of densely populated Gaza. But in a departure from the Bush administration, Obama acknowledged Palestinian suffering and said Gaza's borders should be opened to aid. We speak with MIT professor, Noam Chomsky. [includes rush transcript]

Guest:

**Noam Chomsky**, a professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for over a half-century and written over a hundred books.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** President Obama has made his first substantive remarks on the crisis in Gaza since being elected. Obama was speaking at the State Department, flanked by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, as he named two key envoys. Retired Senate majority leader George Mitchell, who negotiated a lasting agreement in Northern Ireland, will be Middle East envoy. And Richard Holbrooke, who brokered a deal in the Balkans in the mid-1990s, will be envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In his remarks, Obama backed Israel's three-week attack on Gaza as a defensive move against Hamas rocket fire but also said he was deeply concerned about the humanitarian situation for Palestinians in Gaza. The twenty-two-day assault killed more than 1,400 Palestinians, most of them civilians, at least a third children. More than 5,500 were injured. Thirteen Israelis were killed over the same period, ten of them soldiers, and four by friendly fire.

This is some of what President Obama had to say.

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:** Let me be clear: America is committed to Israel's security. And we will always support Israel's right to defend itself against legitimate threats.

For years, Hamas has launched thousands of rockets at innocent Israeli citizens. No democracy can tolerate such danger to its people, nor should the international community, and neither should the Palestinian people themselves, whose interests are only set back by acts of terror.

To be a genuine party to peace, the Quartet has made it clear that Hamas must meet clear conditions: recognize Israel's right to exist, renounce violence, and abide by past agreements. Going forward, the outline for a durable ceasefire is clear: Hamas must end its rocket fire; Israel will complete the withdrawal of its forces from Gaza; the United States and our partners will support a credible anti-smuggling and interdiction regime, so that Hamas cannot rearm.

Yesterday I spoke to President Mubarak and expressed my appreciation for the important role that Egypt played in achieving a ceasefire. And we look forward to Egypt's continued leadership and partnership in laying a foundation for a broader peace through a commitment to end smuggling from within its borders.

Now, just as the terror of rocket fire aimed at innocent Israelis is intolerable, so, too, is a future without hope for the Palestinians. I was deeply concerned by the loss of Palestinian and Israeli life in recent days and by the substantial suffering and humanitarian needs in Gaza. Our hearts go out to Palestinian civilians who are in need of immediate food, clean water and basic medical care, and who've faced suffocating poverty for far too long.

Now we must extend a hand of opportunity to those who seek peace. As part of a lasting ceasefire, Gaza's border crossings should be open to allow the flow of aid and commerce, with an appropriate monitoring regime, with the international and Palestinian Authority participating. Relief efforts must be able to reach innocent Palestinians who depend on them. The United States will fully support an international donor's conference to seek short-term humanitarian assistance and long-term reconstruction for the Palestinian economy. This assistance will be provided to and guided by the Palestinian Authority.

Lasting peace requires more than a long ceasefire, and that's why I will sustain an active commitment to seek two states living side by side in peace and security. Senator Mitchell

will carry forward this commitment, as well as the effort to help Israel reach a broader peace with the Arab world that recognizes its rightful place in the community of nations.

I should add that the Arab peace initiative contains constructive elements that could help advance these efforts. Now is the time for Arab states to act on the initiative's promise by supporting the Palestinian government under President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad, taking steps towards normalizing relations with Israel, and by standing up to extremism that threatens us all. Jordan's constructive role in training Palestinian security forces and nurturing its relations with Israel provide a model for these efforts. And going forward, we must make it clear to all countries in the region that external support for terrorist organizations must stop.

**AMY GOODMAN:** President Obama, speaking at the State Department yesterday. A Hamas spokesperson told Al Jazeera television Obama's position toward the Palestinians doesn't represent a change. Osama Hamdan said, "I think this is an unfortunate start for President Obama in the region and the Middle East issue. And it looks like the next four years, if it continues with the same tone, will be a total failure."

Well, for more on this, we are joined by Noam Chomsky, professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for over half-a-century. He has written over a hundred books, including *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy*.

Welcome to *Democracy Now!*, Noam.

**NOAM CHOMSKY:** Glad to be with you again.

**AMY GOODMAN:** It's good to have you with us. Well, let's start off by your response to President Obama's statement and whether you think it represents a change.

**NOAM CHOMSKY:** It's approximately the Bush position. He began by saying that Israel, like any democracy, has a right to defend itself. That's true, but there's a gap in the reasoning. It has a right to defend itself. It doesn't follow that it has a right to defend itself by force. So we might agree, say, that, you know, the British army in the United States in the colonies in 1776 had a right to defend itself from the terror of George Washington's armies, which was quite real, but it didn't follow they had a right to defend themselves by force, because they had no right to be here. So, yes, they had a right to defend themselves, and they had a way to do it—namely, leave. Same with the Nazis defending themselves against the terror of the partisans. They have no right to do it by force. In the case of Israel, it's exactly the same. They have a right to defend themselves, and they can easily do it. One, in a narrow sense, they could have done it by accepting the ceasefire that Hamas proposed right before the invasion—I won't go through the details—a ceasefire that had been in place and that Israel violated and broke.

But in a broader sense—and this is a crucial omission in everything Obama said, and if you know who his advisers are, you understand why—Israel can defend itself by stopping its crimes. Gaza and the West Bank are a unit. Israel, with US backing, is carrying out constant crimes, not only in Gaza, but also in the West Bank, where it is moving systematically with US support to take over the parts of the West Bank that it wants and to leave Palestinians isolated in unviable cantons, Bantustans, as Sharon called them. Well, stop those crimes, and resistance to them will stop.

Now, Israel has been able pretty much to stop resistance in the Occupied Territories, thanks in large part to the training that Obama praised by Jordan, of course with US funding and monitoring control. So, yes, they've managed to. They, in fact, have been suppressing demonstrations, even demonstrations, peaceful demonstrations, that called for support for the people of Gaza. They have carried out lots of arrests. In fact, they're a collaborationist force, which supports the US and Israel in their effort to take over the West Bank.

Now, that's what Obama—if Israel—there's no question that all of these acts are in total violation of the foundations of international humanitarian law. Israel knows it. Their own advisers have told each other—legal advisers have explained that to them back in '67. The World Court ruled on it. So it's all total criminality. But they want to be able to persist without any objection. And that's the thrust of Obama's remarks. Not a single word about US-backed Israeli crimes, settlement development, cantonization, a takeover in the West Bank. Rather, everyone should be quiet and let the United States and Israel continue with it.

He spoke about the constructive steps of the peace—of the Arab peace agreement very selectively. He said they should move forward towards normalization of relations with Israel. But that wasn't the main theme of the Arab League peace proposal. It was that there should be a two-state settlement, which the US blocks. I mean, he said some words about a two-state settlement, but not where or when or how or anything else. He said nothing about the core of the problem: the US-backed criminal activities both in Gaza, which they attacked at will, and crucially in the West Bank. That's the core of the problem.

And you can understand it when you look at his advisers. So, say, Dennis Ross wrote an 800-page book about—in which he blamed Arafat for everything that's happening—barely mentions the word “settlement” over—which was increasing steadily during the period when he was Clinton's adviser, in fact peaked, a sharp increase in Clinton's last year, not a word about it.

So the thrust of his remarks, Obama's remarks, is that Israel has a right to defend itself by force, even though it has peaceful means to defend itself, that the Arabs must—states must move constructively to normalize relations with Israel, but very carefully omitting the main part of their proposal was that Israel, which is Israel and the United States, should join the overwhelming international consensus for a two-state settlement. That's missing.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Noam, we have to break, but we're going to come back to this discussion. Noam Chomsky, joining us from Massachusetts, a professor of linguistics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has written many books on the Middle East. We'll be back with him in a moment.

[break]

**AMY GOODMAN:** Our guest is Professor Noam Chomsky, author of many books on the Middle East. Among his books are *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy*, also *Hegemony or Survival*. Juan?

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** Noam Chomsky, I'd like to ask you about the enormous civilian casualties that have shocked the entire world in this last Israeli offensive. The Israelis claim, on the one hand, that it's the unfortunate result of Hamas hiding among the civilian population, but you've said in a recent analysis that this has been Israeli policy almost from the founding of the state, the attack on civilian populations. Could you explain?

**NOAM CHOMSKY:** They say so. I was just quoting the chief of staff—this is thirty years ago, virtually no Palestinian terrorism in Israel, virtually. He said, "Our policy has been to attack civilians." And the reason was explained—you know, villages, towns, so on. And it was explained by Abba Eban, the distinguished statesman, who said, "Yes, that's what we've done, and we did it for a good reason. There was a rational prospect that if we attack the civilian population and cause it enough pain, they will press for a," what he called, "a cessation of hostilities." That's a euphemism meaning cessation of resistance against Israel's takeover of the—moves which were going on at the time to take over the Occupied Territories. So, sure, if they—"We'll kill enough of them, so that they'll press for quiet to permit us to continue what we're doing."

Actually, you know, Obama today didn't put it in those words, but the meaning is approximately the same. That's the meaning of his silence over the core issue of settling and takeover of the Occupied Territories and eliminating the possibility for any Palestinian meaningful independence, omission of this. But Eban [inaudible], who I was quoting, chief of staff, would have also said, you know, "And my heart bleeds for the civilians who are suffering. But what can we do? We have to pursue the rational prospect that if we cause them enough pain, they'll call off any opposition to our takeover of their lands and resources." But it was—I mean, I was just quoting it. They said it very frankly. That was thirty years ago, and there's plenty more beside that.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** And Obama's call to open up Gaza, to end the blockade of Gaza on the Israelis, do you see that as any kind of a meaningful turn?

**NOAM CHOMSKY:** It would—those are nice words. And if he did it, that would be fine. But there isn't any indication that he means it. In fact, this morning on the—Israel has already made it clear, stated explicitly, its foreign minister Tzipi Livni, that they're not going to live up to the ceasefire until Gaza returns to them a captured soldier. Well, that avoids the fact that Israel is far in the lead, not in capturing soldiers, but in kidnapping civilians, hijacking ships, bringing them to Israel as hostages. In fact, one day before this Israeli soldier was captured at the border, Israeli forces entered Gaza and kidnapped two civilians and took them to Israel, where they were hidden away in the prison system sometime. So, and in fact, according to reports I just received from Israel—I can't give you a source—they say that the radio news this morning has been reporting steadily that Amos Gilad, who's the go-between between Israel and Egypt, notified the

Egyptians that Israel is not interested in a ceasefire agreement, but rather an arrangement to stop the missiles and to free Gilad Shalit. OK, I presume that will be in the newspapers later. So, yes, it's nice to say, "Let's open the borders," but not avoiding the conditions that are imposed, in fact, not even mentioning the fact that the borders have been closed for years because the United States has backed Israeli closure of them.

And again, his main point, which he started with, Israel, like any democracy, has a right to defend itself. That is true, but deceitful, because it has a right to defend itself, but not by force, especially when there are peaceful options that are completely open, the narrow one being a ceasefire, which the US and Israel would observe for the first time, and the second and the deeper one, by ending the crimes in the Occupied Territories.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Noam Chomsky, the timing of all of this—can you talk about Election Day here in the United States, November 4th, what exactly happened there, and then the fact that it went from Election Day to three days before the inauguration of Barack Obama, Israel's announcement of the unilateral ceasefire?

**NOAM CHOMSKY:** On Election Day, November 4th, Israel violated—violently violated a ceasefire that had held, free will, in fact, a sharp reduction in rockets, probably not even from Hamas. It had been established in June or July. On November 4th, Election Day, presumably because the attention was shifted elsewhere, Israeli forces entered Gaza, killed half a dozen, what they call, militants, and the pretext was they found a tunnel in Gaza. Well, you know, from a military point of view, that's an absurdity. If there was a tunnel and if it ever reached the Israeli border, they'd stop it right there. So this was obviously just a way to break the ceasefire, kill a couple of Hamas militants and ensure that the conflict would go on.

As for the bombing, it was very carefully timed. And, in fact, they've told us this. They've told us it was meticulously timed for months before the invasion, a very target-selected timing, everything. It began on a Saturday, timed at right before noon, when children were leaving schools, people milling in the streets of the densely populated city, perhaps the most densely in the world. That's when it began. They killed a couple hundred people in the first few minutes.

And it ended—it was timed to end right before the inauguration. Now, presumably the reason was—Obama had kept silent about the atrocities and the killings, a horrible, horrible story, which you can see on Al Jazeera and little bits of it here. He had kept silent on the pretext that there's only one president. Well, on Inauguration Day, that goes. There's two—there's a new president. And Israel surely wanted to make it—to ensure that he would not be in a position where he would have to say something about the ongoing atrocities. So they terminated it, probably temporarily, right before the inauguration. And then he could go on with what we heard today.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Noam Chomsky, I want to turn for a second to George Mitchell, who President Obama has tapped as the special envoy to the Middle East. Mitchell is the retired Senate majority leader, best known for helping to broker Northern Ireland's landmark Good Friday Agreement in 1998, which ended decades of bloody conflict. In 2000, Mitchell was appointed by former president Bill Clinton to head a committee investigating ongoing Israeli-

Palestinian violence. Sallai Meridor, Israel's ambassador to Washington, welcomed Obama's appointment of Mitchell, saying Israel holds him in, quote, "high regard." This is some of what George Mitchell had to say yesterday.

**GEORGE MITCHELL:** The Secretary of State has just talked about our long-term objective, and the President himself has said that his administration—and I quote—“will make a sustained push, working with Israelis and Palestinians to achieve the goal of two states: a Jewish state in Israel and a Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security.”

This effort must be determined, persevering and patient. It must be backed up by political capital, economic resources, and focused attention at the highest levels of our government. And it must be firmly rooted in a shared vision of a peaceful future by the people who live in the region. At the direction of the President and the Secretary of State, and in pursuit of the President's policies, I pledge my full effort in the search for peace and stability in the Middle East.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Obama's new Middle East envoy, former senator George Mitchell. Noam Chomsky, your response?

**NOAM CHOMSKY:** In Ireland, Mitchell did quite a commendable job. But notice that in Ireland, there was an objective, and he helped realize that objective: peaceful reconciliation. Britain took into account for the first time the grievances of the population, and the terror stopped. OK? And the terror was quite real.

In Israel, again, you have to look at what he avoided. He says, “Yes, we want to have a Palestinian state.” Where? OK? He said not a word about—lots of pleasantries about everyone should live in peace, and so on, but where is the Palestinian state? Nothing said about the US-backed actions continuing every day, which are undermining any possibility for a viable Palestinian state: the takeover of the territory; the annexation wall, which is what it is; the takeover of the Jordan Valley; the salients that cut through the West Bank and effectively trisect it; the hundreds of mostly arbitrary checkpoints designed to make Palestinian life impossible—all going on, not a word about them.

So, OK, we can have—in fact, you know, the first Israeli government to talk about a Palestinian state, to even mention the words, was the ultra right-wing Netanyahu government that came in 1996. They were asked, “Could Palestinians have a state?” Peres, who had preceded them, said, “No, never.” And Netanyahu's spokesman said, “Yeah, the fragments of territory that we leave to them, they can call it a state if they want. Or they can call it fried chicken.” Well, that's basically the attitude.

And Mitchell had nothing to say about it. He carefully avoided what he knows for certain is the core problem: the illegal, totally illegal, the criminal US-backed actions, which are

systematically taking over the West Bank, just as they did under Clinton, and are undermining the possibility for a viable state.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** Noam Chomsky, for Americans who want to figure out how to move now with the new Obama administration to end these atrocities that are occurring in the Middle East, what do you suggest? And also, what's your viewpoint of the divestment movement? Many young people are urging something similar to South Africa, to begin pressing increasingly for divestment from Israel.

**NOAM CHOMSKY:** The position that people who are interested in peace ought to take is very straightforward. I mean, a majority of the American population, considerable majority, already agree with the full Arab League peace plan, not the little sliver of it that Obama mentioned. The peace plan calls for a two-state settlement on the international border, maybe with minor modifications. That's an overwhelming national consensus. The Hamas supports it. Iran has said, you know, they'll go along with it.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Noam, we only have thirty seconds.

**NOAM CHOMSKY:** OK, so we should push for that.

Is divestment a proper tactic? Well, you know, if you look back at South Africa, divestment became a proper tactic after years, decades of education and organizing, to the point where Congress was legislating against trade, corporations were pulling out, and so on. That's what's missing: the education and organizing which makes it an understandable move. And, in fact, if we ever got to that point, you wouldn't even need it, because the US could be brought in line with international opinion.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Noam Chomsky, we want to thank you very much for being with us. And from all of us at *Democracy Now!*, condolences on the death of Carol, your wife of more than half a century.

**NOAM CHOMSKY:** Thank you.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Thanks, Noam. Noam Chomsky, professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.