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## **America's current stance on Israel-Palestine: Old wine in not even new bottles**

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By Noam Chomsky

Barack Obama is recognized to be a person of acute intelligence, a legal scholar, careful with his choice of words. He deserves to be taken seriously – both what he says, and what he omits. Particularly significant is his first substantive statement on foreign affairs, on January 22, at the State Department, when introducing George Mitchell to serve as his special envoy for Middle East peace.

Mitchell is to focus his attention on the Israel-Palestine problem, in the wake of the recent US-Israeli invasion of Gaza. During the murderous assault, Obama remained silent apart from a few platitudes, because, he said, there is only one president – a fact that did not silence him on many other issues. His campaign did, however, repeat his statement that “if missiles were falling where my two daughters sleep, I would do everything in order to stop that.” He was referring to Israeli children, not the hundreds of Palestinian children being butchered by US arms, about whom he could not speak, because there was only one president.

On January 22, however, the one president was Obama, so he could speak freely about these matters – avoiding, however, the attack on Gaza, which had, conveniently, been called off just before the inauguration.

Obama's talk emphasized his commitment to a peaceful settlement. He left its contours vague, apart from one specific proposal: “The Arab peace initiative,” Obama said, “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 Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, taking steps toward normalizing relations with Israel, and by standing up to extremism that threatens us all.”

Obama is not directly falsifying the Arab League proposal, but the carefully framed deceit is instructive.

The Arab League peace proposal does indeed call for normalization of relations with Israel – in the context, repeat, in the context of a two-state settlement in terms of the longstanding international consensus, which the US and Israel have blocked for over 30 years, in international isolation, and still do. The core of the Arab League proposal, as Obama and his Mideast advisers know very well, is its call for a peaceful political settlement in these terms, which are well-known, and recognized to be the

only basis for the peaceful settlement to which Obama professes to be committed. The omission of that crucial fact can hardly be accidental, and signals clearly that Obama envisions no departure from US rejectionism. His call for the Arab states to act on a corollary to their proposal, while the US ignores even the existence of its central content, which is the precondition for the corollary, surpasses cynicism. The most significant acts to undermine a peaceful settlement are the daily US-backed actions in the occupied territories, all recognized to be criminal: taking over valuable land and resources and constructing what the leading architect of the plan, Ariel Sharon, regarded as Bantustans for Palestinians (Zertal-Eldar) – an unfair comparison because the Bantustans were far more viable than the fragments left to Palestinians under Sharon’s conception, now being realized. But the US and Israel even continue to oppose a political settlement in words, most recently in December 2008, when the US and Israel (and a few Pacific islands) voted against a UN resolution supporting “the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination” (passed 173 to 5, US-Israel opposed, with evasive pretexts).

Also unmentioned is Israel’s use of US arms in Gaza, in violation not only of international but also US law. Or Washington’s shipment of new arms to Israel right at the peak of the US-Israeli attack, surely not unknown to Obama’s Middle East advisers.

Obama provided the usual reasons for ignoring the elected government led by Hamas. “To be a genuine party to peace,” Obama declared, “the ‘Quartet’ [US, EU, Russia, UN] has made it clear that Hamas must meet clear conditions: recognize Israel’s right to exist; renounce violence; and abide by past agreements.” Unmentioned, also as usual, is the inconvenient fact that the US and Israel firmly reject all three conditions. In international isolation, they bar a two-state settlement including a Palestinian state; they of course do not renounce violence; and they reject the Quartet’s central proposal, the “road map.” Israel formally accepted it, but with 14 reservations that effectively eliminate its contents (tacitly backed by the US). It is the great merit of Jimmy Carter’s *Palestine: Peace not Apartheid*, to have brought these facts to public attention for the first time – and in the mainstream, the only time.

Obama began his remarks by saying: “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.”

There was nothing about the right of Palestinians to defend themselves against far more extreme threats, such as those occurring daily, with US support, in the Occupied Territories. But that again is the norm.

Also normal is the enunciation of the principle that Israel has the right to defend itself. That is correct, but vacuous: so does everyone. But in the context the cliché is worse than vacuous: it is more cynical deceit.

The issue is not whether Israel has the right to defend itself, like everyone else, but whether it has the right to do so by force. No one, including Obama, believes that states enjoy a general right to defend themselves by force: it is first necessary to demonstrate that there are no peaceful alternatives that can be tried. In this case, there surely are.

In short, Obama's forceful reiteration of Israel's right to defend itself is another exercise of cynical deceit – though, it must be admitted, not unique to him, but virtually universal.

The deceit is particularly striking in this case because the occasion was the appointment of Mitchell as special envoy. Mitchell's primary achievement was his leading role in the peaceful settlement in northern Ireland. It called for an end to IRA terror and British violence. Implicit is the recognition that while Britain had the right to defend itself from terror, it had no right to do so by force, because there was a peaceful alternative: recognition of the legitimate grievances of the Irish Catholic community that were the roots of IRA terror. When Britain adopted that sensible course, the terror ended. The implications for Mitchell's mission with regard to Israel-Palestine are so obvious that they need not be spelled out. And omission of them is, again, a striking indication of the commitment of the Obama administration to traditional US rejectionism and opposition to peace, except on its extremist terms.

Obama's State Department talk about the Middle East continued with "the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan ... the central front in our enduring struggle against terrorism and extremism."

A few hours later, US planes attacked a remote village in Afghanistan, intending to kill a Taliban commander. "Village elders, though, told provincial officials there were no Taliban in the area, which they described as a hamlet populated mainly by shepherds. Women and children were among the 22 dead, they said, according to Hamididan Abdel-Rahmzai, the head of the provincial council," according to the January 24 edition of the LA Times.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai's first message to Obama after he was elected in November was a plea to end the bombing of Afghan civilians, reiterated a few hours before Obama was sworn in. This was considered as significant as Karzai's call for a timetable for departure of US and other foreign forces. The rich and powerful have their "responsibilities." Among them, the New York Times reported, is to "provide security" in southern Afghanistan, where "the insurgency is homegrown and self-sustaining." All familiar. From Pravda in the 1980s, for example.

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