

INTERVIEW WITH NOAM CHOMSKY

*Q: Three years since the start of the Arab revolutions, the region has witnessed a kaleidoscope of dramatic developments ranging from free elections to the violent suppression of change. How would you describe the Arab Spring today?*

A: In the past I've described it as a "work in progress." Now, regrettably, the phrase "work in regress" would be more appropriate. The oil dictatorships have been able to repress most efforts at even mild reform, Syria is hurtling to suicide and likely partition, Yemen is subjected to Obama's global drone terror campaign, Tunisia is in a kind of limbo, Libya lacks a government that can control the militias, and in Egypt, the major country of the Arab world, the military have acted with extreme brutality – and popular support that they should not have in my opinion – in what seems to be an effort to restore their harsh political control and maintain their economic empire, while reversing some of the most significant gains of the earlier period, such as press freedom and independence. The signs do not look good.

In addition, the Sunni-Shi'i conflict instigated by US-UK aggression in Iraq is tearing the country to shreds and spreading ominously over the whole region. There are two parts of the Arab world that remain effectively colonies: Western Sahara, where the democracy demonstrations of late 2010 were harshly repressed and the struggle of Sahrawis for freedom has been almost forgotten, and of course Palestine, where negotiations are underway conforming to the two essential US-Israeli preconditions: that there be no barrier to expansion of the illegal settlements, and that the negotiations be run by the US, which is a participant in the conflict (on the side of Israel) and has been blocking the overwhelming international consensus on a diplomatic settlement since 1976, when it vetoed a Security Council resolution calling for its basic terms, with rare and temporary exceptions.

Under those preconditions, negotiations are likely to be hardly more than a cover for Israel to carry forward its programs of integrating into Israel what it regards as valuable in the West Bank, including few Arabs so as to avoid the "demographic problem," with continuing US support, and to separate the West Bank from Gaza in violation of the Oslo Accords, while maintaining the brutal siege. Not a bright moment, but the sparks lit by the Arab spring are likely to burst into flames again.

*Q: Initial hopes for a linear trajectory towards empowerment and democracy have long disappeared. Was the euphoria misplaced? Where and when did things go wrong?*

A: There never should have been hopes for a linear trajectory. The Arab Spring was a development of historic importance, threatening many powerful interests. Power does not say "thank you for dismantling us," then walking quietly away.

*Q: Western reactions have ranged from military intervention to a hands-off approach as seen in the Gulf States. Do you see an underlying pattern here?*

A: The underlying pattern is familiar: support your favorite dictator as long as possible. If it becomes impossible because the military or business classes turn against him or for some other reason, then send him off somewhere, issue ringing declarations about your love of democracy, and try to restore the old order as fully as possible. It happens over and over. To mention just a few: Somoza, Marcos, Duvalier, Suharto, Mobutu,...

It's a natural policy for an imperial power, hence completely familiar. It's also natural for the picture to be ignored or suppressed. The task of the intellectual community is to support power and justify it, not undermine it – though some break the rules.

*Q: One of several regional fault lines seems to be the clash between secular and religious forces. Do you see a way this dichotomy can be dealt with constructively? What role should Western governments play?*

A: Neither history, nor logic, nor policy analysis, nor any other source apart from propaganda gives us any reason to expect power systems to play a constructive role, unless it happens to be in their interest. That's true of western systems, as a special case. In the MENA region, the major powers – Britain, then the US – have fairly consistently supported radical Islam as a counter to secular nationalism. The favorite has been Saudi Arabia, the most extreme radical Islamist state, and a missionary state, spreading its Wahabbist-Salafist doctrines throughout the region.

There are excellent and careful scholarly studies of US “democracy promotion” by their most prominent advocates, who concede, reluctantly, that the government supports democracy if and only if it conforms to economic and strategic interests – just as any rational person would expect.

What role should they play? That's easy. They should support freedom, justice, human rights, Democracy. We can say the same about Russia and China. To some extent organized popular forces can impel governments in this direction, but there is little sign of that today, for many reasons.

*Q: On another level, tensions between religious denominations appear to be on the rise. Already in 2004, Jordan's King Abdullah spoke of a "Shia Crescent". Is this notion of a Sunni-Shia proxy war the appropriate lens for understanding current conflicts in the region?*

A: One of the grim consequences of US-UK aggression in Iraq was igniting Sunni-Shia conflicts that had been subdued previously, leading to a horror story that is tearing Iraq apart and has spread over the region, with awful and ominous effects.

And honesty would impel us to recall the judgment of Nuremberg, one of the foundations of modern international law. Aggression was determined to be “the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole” – in this case, including the sectarian conflicts among many other crimes. Honesty would also impel us to recall the injunction that Justice Robert Jackson delivered to the Tribunal: we are handing these defendants a “poisoned chalice,” and if we carry out similar crimes we must suffer the same consequences, or else this Tribunal is a farce, merely victor's justice. One measure of the gap

between Western moral-intellectual culture and civilization is how well these words have been heeded.

*The interview was conducted by email and was published on 18 November 2013. The questions were asked by Michael Bröning.*