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By C.J. Polychroniou

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Interview with philosopher and activist Noam Chomsky

## *Biden's Near East Travel Considerations*



**Sources:** Truthout

*In this interview, Noam Chomsky notes that Biden fulfills an American tradition: relations with Saudi Arabia "have always been friendly, unaffected by the appalling Saudi record of human rights abuses, which persists to this day."*

Security is also likely to figure in Biden's travel equation, particularly with respect to Israel. He will also visit the West Bank and meet with Palestinian leaders, but it is difficult to know what he hopes to achieve there. As Chomsky points out, "Palestinian hopes lie elsewhere."

**C. J. Polychroniou (CJP):** US foreign policy under Joe Biden is hardly distinguishable from Trump's, as you noted a few months after Biden took office. When he was a candidate, Biden called Saudi Arabia a "pariah" state in the wake of

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**the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, but as president he shows sympathy for his de facto leader, the criminal Mohammed bin Salman. What do you think is the purpose of your visit to Saudi Arabia?**

Noam Chomsky (NCh): It's certainly a mistake to commit the sadistic murder of a Washington Post journalist, particularly one who was praised as "guardian of the truth" in 2018, when he was voted Time magazine's Person of the Year. In short, it gives a very bad image, especially when it was executed carelessly and did not hide well.

Washington's relations with the family kingdom called 'Saudi Arabia' have always been friendly, unaffected by the appalling Saudi record of human rights abuses, which persists to this day. This is not surprising in the case of 'a stupendous source of strategic power and one of the greatest material prizes in world history... probably the world's largest economic prize in the field of foreign investment," as the State Department described it in the mid-1940s, when the United States snatched that prize from Britain in a mini-war during World War II. More broadly, the Middle East has been regarded in high-level politics as the "most important strategic zone in the world," in the words of former President Eisenhower. While evaluations have varied over the course of 80 years, the essence remains.

The same is true for countries that do not reach that impressive level. The United States has usually given strong support to murderous tyrants when it suits them, often until the last minute of their government. We sincerely want them to be free... Free to do what we want. It's largely the same with Saudi Arabia. We want them to be more civilized, but first things first.

In the case of Biden's visit, the former certainly includes renewed efforts to persuade bin Salman to increase oil production to reduce U.S. gasoline prices. There would be other paths, for example, a tax on excessive profits on fossil fuel industries, and redistributing income to those who have been buried by the neoliberal class war of the past 40 years, which has transferred \$50 trillion into the pockets of the top one percent. That, however, is 'politically impossible'.

There are broader considerations in Biden's trip to the Middle East. One goal, no doubt, is to cement Trump's only major geopolitical achievement: the Abraham Accords, which elevated tacit relations between the Middle East's/North Africa's most criminal states to a formal alliance. The agreements have been praised as contributing to peace and prosperity, although not everyone is pleased. They are not, for example, the Saharawis, handed over to the Moroccan dictatorship to ensure that it joined the agreements... in violation of

international law, but in accordance with the 'rules-based order' that the US and its allies prefer to the archaic and unacceptable UN-based order.

The Sahrawis can join the Palestinians and Syrian Druze, whose territories have been annexed by Israel, in violation of the unanimous orders of the Security Council, now backed by Washington. And they can also join other "non-existent people," including Palestinian victims of the brutal and illegal occupation of areas that have not been officially annexed.

**CJP: Israel may be the only country in the world where Biden is less popular than Trump and there is no way to forget the numerous occasions when he has been humiliated by former Israeli Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu. Is there anything Biden hopes to accomplish with his visit to Israel other than reaffirming U.S. support and deepening the role of the two-nation alliance in the region?**

NCh: As in the case of Khashoggi, the handling of Abu Akleh's case was rather messy. Not just murder. It is not a good idea, in front of television cameras, to allow the Israeli army to attack a funeral procession and even gravediggers, forcing them almost to drop the coffin. The audacity of the assault is a telling illustration of Israel's rightward slide and its confidence that the boss will accept virtually everything. Trust is not entirely wrong, particularly after four years of generous gifts and kicks in the face of the Palestinians in the Trump administration.

I haven't seen polls, but it wouldn't be much of a surprise to find that Trump is also popular in Hungary's 'illiberal democracy', praised by Trump and virtually revered by far-right media star Tucker Carlson. Viktor Orbán's Hungary now becomes Israel's close ally, based on shared racist attitudes and practices, as does its annoyance at not being appreciated by soft-hearted liberals in the West.

An open question is how much domestic capital Biden will gain from his expected expressions of eternal love for Israel. That stance has become less popular than it was among its liberal base, as Israel's criminal behavior becomes harder to swallow.

Like Britain before it, the United States tended to support radical Islam, which it saw less as a threat to imperial rule. Israel settled the matter at that time by handing victory to Saudi Arabia. It was at this point that US support for Israel took the extreme form that has prevailed ever since, as part of a strategy towards the Middle East, based on three pillars: Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran (at the time ruled by the shah). Technically, all three were at war. In reality, they were tacit allies, very close in the case of Israel and Iran.

The Abraham Accords elevate the covenant to a formal level, now with a slightly different cast.

**CJP: Do you see any reason why Palestinian leaders should meet with Biden? Can they accomplish more than just taking a picture with the president of the United States?**

NCh: Failure to do so would spark a wave of hostile propaganda, which is what the beleaguered Palestinians need least now. Doing so will accomplish little or nothing, but apparently it's the least bad option.

So much for that question itself. Palestinian hopes lie elsewhere.

It seems strange to say this now, in light of the colossal American support for Israel after its show of military force in 1967, but Palestinian hopes might lie with the United States. There are fissures in the previously solid support for Israeli actions. Liberal opinion has shifted toward support for Palestinian rights, including among the Jewish community, as Norman Finkelstein documented a decade ago. The increasingly brutal torture of the 2 million inhabitants of Gaza's open-air prison has had particularly dramatic effects.

These changes do not yet influence policy, but they are likely to become more pronounced as Israel continues to drift to the right and near-everyday crimes become increasingly difficult to hide or explain. If the Palestinians can overcome their strong internal divisions and effective solidarity movements develop in the United States, changes can come, both at the level of the people and in government policy.

That could be a path to the elusive goal of a just peace in the former Palestine and even to regional agreements that reflect not only the interests of the repressive structures of power, but of the peoples of the region, who have repeatedly fought for a better fate.

\* Originally published in Truthout

Source: <https://www.jornada.com.mx/notas/2022/07/18/chomsky/chomsky-huellas-de-trump-en-la-visita-de-biden-a-medio-oriente/>

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