Noam Chomsky barred from entering West Bank

David Walsh
19 May 2010

Israeli authorities barred Noam Chomsky, professor emeritus of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a well-known critic of Zionist policy, from entering the Israeli-occupied West Bank Sunday.

After being questioned for several hours, he and his daughter Avi were turned back. Chomsky had been scheduled to deliver three lectures at Birzeit University, the leading Palestinian institution, one of them on Monday. Instead, he participated in the latter seminar on US foreign policy, attended by 100 Birzeit students, via videoconferencing. Chomsky, who lived in Israel on a kibbutz in 1953, has visited and lectured in the country numerous times in the past.

In the aftermath of the episode, the Israeli interior ministry claimed the decision to deny Chomsky entry was a "misunderstanding." A senior government official told the AFP that the situation was "a total cockup." The interior ministry asserted that Chomsky would be granted entry if he tried to cross from Jordan again, but the MIT professor learned that the government, in fact, would not "officially" guarantee his admittance and decided to deliver his talk by other means.

Later, interior ministry spokeswoman Sabine Hadad blamed the incident on the Israeli military's Coordinator for Government Activities in the Territories. She denied that Chomsky's name was on an Israeli government blacklist.

Adding to its list of excuses, the interior ministry claimed that border officials barred the 81-year-old Chomsky because "they mistakenly thought he was also planning to visit other places in Israel outside the Palestinian territory." (*Boston Globe*) Avi Chomsky told the *Globe*, "This is nonsense," she said. "It was quite clear in our interview that they knew we were going only to Ramallah. In fact, that's what they were upset about—the guy kept saying, 'Why won't you go to Tel Aviv?'"

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told a Knesset (parliament) session that he knew nothing about the ban, insolently claiming, "We read about it in the paper."

The *New York Times* asserted in a news article that "Government spokesmen were mortified at the development." Mark Regev, a spokesman for Netanyahu told the *Times*, "There is no change in our policy… The idea that Israel is preventing people from entering whose opinions are critical of the state is ludicrous; it is not happening. This was a mistake. A guy at the border overstepped his authority."

Chomsky told Al Jazeera in an interview, "After several hours of waiting and multiple interrogations our two friends were permitted entry and my daughter and I were informed that we were denied entry after much discussion indirectly with the interior ministry.

"Chomsky said the border officials were 'very polite' as they 'transmitted inquiries from the [Israeli] ministry of the interior.'"

Chomsky told Al Jazeera he believed he was denied entry for two reasons.

"The government does not like the kind of things I say which puts them into the category of every other government in the world," he said. "The second was that they seemed upset about the fact that I was taking an invitation from Birzeit and I had no plans of speaking to any Israeli universities as I've done many times in the past, but not this time."

Summing up, Chomsky told the media: "The facts were completely clear to everyone, so there's no basis for any misunderstanding. It was a decision on the part of the Ministry of the Interior." (*Boston Globe*)

In any event, Otniel Schneller, a politician from the

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"moderate" Kadima party, blurted out something closer to the Israeli establishment's real view. Schneller defended banning Chomsky, in a radio interview, as part of "the need to protect our existence… Let's say he came to lecture at Birzeit. What would he say? That Israel kills Arabs, that Israel is an apartheid state?" Schneller further commented to the media, "It's good that Israel did not allow one of its accusers to enter its territory. I recommend [Chomsky] try one of the tunnels connecting Gaza and Egypt."

Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, Secretary General of the Palestinian National Initiative, and Chomsky's scheduled host, co-hosted a press conference in Ramallah on Monday with Chomsky, who spoke from Amman, Jordan. Barghouti commented: "Israel is telling us and the world that no one can visit or work here in the West Bank without permission from their military authorities. We will not accept the establishment of such a precedent. It is a very dangerous regression and we will struggle against it in every possible way."

Birzeit University officials, in a statement, "deplored" the decision to bar Chomsky. They went on: "Birzeit University faces the harsh and systematic restrictions imposed on it by Israel's occupation on a daily basis. Its students and staff are denied access to resources, their movements are curtailed and their academic freedom is regularly violated. Students and staff often face harassment and arbitrary arrest and detention by the Israeli military."

A representative of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), lawyer Oded Feller, denounced the Israeli government action. "The decision to prevent an individual from expressing his or her views by denying entry is characteristic of a totalitarian regime," said Feller.

Haaretz, in an editorial, decried Israel's "Declaring war on the intellect." By stopping Chomsky at the Allenby Bridge and barring his entry into Israel and the Palestinian Authority, commented the editors, "the government's outrageous treatment of those with the audacity to criticize its policies has reached new heights. Israel looks like a bully who has been insulted by a superior intellect and is now trying to fight it, arrest it and expel it."

The assertion by Regev, Netanyahu's representative, that Israel doesn't prevent "people from entering whose opinions are critical of the state" is a lie. It does it all the time. ACRI's Feller pointed out to the *Jerusalem Post*, "Dozens of people are refused entry to Israel every week…

"Feller said that while cases like Chomsky's grabbed the public's attention because of his reputation and stature, the reality was that Israel denied entry to people who held similar beliefs and opinions as a matter of fact.

"'Chomsky made headlines because of his fame, but foreign human rights activists, peace activists, political leaders, not to mention Palestinians and their relatives, are denied entry on a regular basis,' he said."

The *New York Times* points to a number of the better-known recent cases:

*In April, one of Spain's most famous clowns, Ivan Prado, "spent six hours at Ben-Gurion airport in Tel Aviv being questioned before being sent back to Madrid." Israeli officials accused him of "having ties with Palestinian terrorist groups."

*"In January, Jared Malsin, a young American editor working in Bethlehem for a Palestinian news agency, was barred from reentering at Ben-Gurion airport after officials said he would not answer questions satisfactorily."

*Richard Falk, an American who works as a UN investigator of human rights in the Palestinian territories, was "seized at the airport and not permitted entry" in December 2008 on the grounds that "he was hostile to Israel."

*In May 2008, well-known anti-Zionist scholar Norman Finkelstein was deported from Israel, after 24 hours of interrogation by the Israeli security service, due to "security concerns." A fierce critic of Israeli policy, Finkelstein—the son of a Holocaust survivor—was banned from the country for 10 years. Finkelstein, like Chomsky, is an advocate of the "two-state solution" to the Palestinian-Israeli problem and argues, "I'm not an enemy of Israel."

It is a sign both of the extreme right-wing character of the Netanyahu regime, and the deep instability of the political situation in Israel, that the government has taken the step of banning a figure as prominent as Chomsky.

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