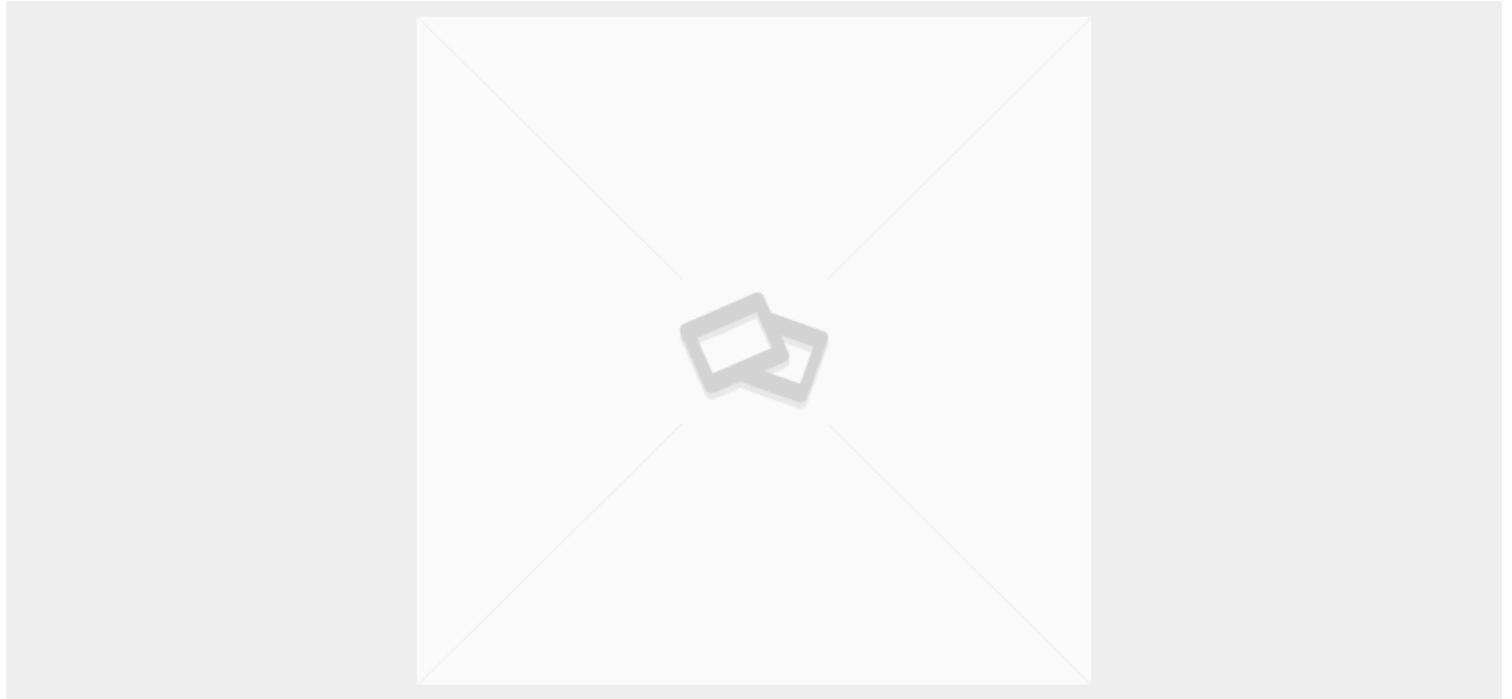# ISRAEL BARS CHOMSKY FROM OCCUPIED WEST BANK

Posted on May 18, 2010 by Keghart

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By Ethan Bronner, International Herald Tribune, 18 May 2010

 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0vvaNM9J0U&feature=player_embedded

A fierce debate broke out in Israel on Monday over the country's refusal to permit the linguist Noam Chomsky, an icon of the American left, to enter the occupied West Bank from Jordan.

Front-page coverage and heated morning radio discussions asked how Professor Chomsky, an 81-year-old professor emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, could pose a risk to Israel and how a country that frequently asserts its status as a robust democracy could keep out people whose views it found offensive.

Professor Chomsky, who is Jewish and spent time living on a kibbutz in Israel in the 1950s, is an outspoken critic both of American and Israeli policy. He has objected to Israel's foundation as a Jewish state, but he has supported a two-state solution and has not condemned Israel's existence in the terms of the country's sharpest critics.

The decision Sunday to bar him from entering the West Bank to speak at Birzeit, a Palestinian university, "is a foolish act in a frequent series of recent follies," remarked Boaz Okun, the legal commentator of the newspaper Yediot Aharonot, in his Monday column. "Put together, they may mark the end of Israel as a law-abiding and freedom-loving state, or at least place a large question mark over this notion."

Government spokesmen were mortified at the development and issued statements saying that the decision was made by an Interior Ministry official at the Jordan-West Bank border and did not represent policy.

"There is no change in our policy," said Mark Regev, a spokesman for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. "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 mishap. A guy at the border overstepped his authority."

Mr. Regev suggested that if Professor Chomsky tried to enter again, he would succeed.

But Professor Chomsky said in a television interview from Jordan with Al Jazeera that the Interior Ministry official who interviewed him was on the phone with other ministry officials during the

several hours of questioning on Sunday at the West Bank border and that he was taking instructions from his superiors.

"There were two basic points," Professor Chomsky told the interviewer. "One was that the government of Israel does not like the kinds of things I say — which puts them into the category of I suppose every other government in the world. The second was that they seemed upset about the fact that I was just taking an invitation from Birzeit and I had no plans to go on to speak in Israeli universities, as I have done many times in the past, but not this time."

Some conservative members of Parliament said they had no objection to the decision.

"This is a decision of principle between the democratic ideal — and we all want freedom of speech and movement — and the need to protect our existence," said Otniel Schneller, of the centrist Kadima party, on Israel Radio. "Let's say he came to lecture at Birzeit. What would he say? That Israel kills Arabs, that Israel is an apartheid state?"

In another three months, Mr. Schneller went on, some Israeli would be standing over her son's grave, the victim of incitement "in the name of free speech." People like Professor Chomsky, he added, do not have to be granted permission to enter.

Professor Chomsky said he had last visited in 1997. This time he came to the border with his daughter and two friends. The friends were permitted entry but he and his daughter were not. In the end, all four chose to return to Amman, the Jordanian capital.

Moustafa Barghouti, who was to be Professor Chomsky's host in the West Bank, condemned Israel's refusal to let him in, saying, "The decision of Israel to prevent Professor Chomsky from entering the Palestinian Territories is a result of the numerous campaigns against Chomsky organized by the Jewish lobby in the United States."

Israel has felt its legitimacy increasingly under attack and that has added to the debate here over Professor Chomsky. Another reason Monday's discussion was so heated is that Professor Chomsky is not the first controversial figure denied entry in the past few years to Israel or the West Bank.

Late last month, Ivan Prado, one of Spain's most famous clowns, spent six hours at Ben-Gurion airport in Tel Aviv being questioned before being sent back to Madrid. He had planned to run a clown festival modeled after one in Spain in the West Bank city of Ramallah but was accused of having ties with Palestinian terrorist groups by the Israelis.

A Foreign Ministry spokesman said that Mr. Prado was caught lying during questioning at the airport and that his cellphone, which he denied having, contained a telephone number of a Palestinian who Israel considered to be a member of a terrorist group.

In January, Jared Malsin, a young American editor working in Bethlehem for a Palestinian news agency, was barred from re-entering at Ben-Gurion airport after officials said he would not answer

questions satisfactorily.

In December 2008, Israel barred Richard Falk, an American who is a United Nations investigator of human rights in the Palestinian areas, saying he was hostile to Israel. He was seized at the airport and not permitted entry.

And a few months earlier that year, Norman Finkelstein, a scholar who is a critic of Israel and its policies, was barred from entering after a visit in Lebanon that included conversations with officials of Hezbollah. Israeli officials said that Mr. Finkelstein refused to describe the nature of those talks.