The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
n-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

The Most wanted List. International Terrorism

Noam Chomsky

How is terrorism to be defined in the contemporary world? Who are the terrorists? What distinguishes state terrorism from other forms of terrorism? Noam Chomsky offers a global perspective on these issues with particular reference to the United States, Israel and the Middle East. Japan Focus

On February 13, Imad Moughniyeh, a senior commander of Hizbollah, was assassinated in Damascus. "The world is a better place without this man in it," State Department spokesperson Sean McCormack said: "one way or the other he was brought to justice." Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell added that Moughniyeh has been "responsible for more deaths of Americans and Israelis than any other terrorist with the exception of Osama bin Laden."

Joy was unconstrained in Israel too, as "one of the U.S. and Israel's most wanted men" was brought to justice, the London *Financial Times* reported. Under the heading, "A militant wanted the world over," an accompanying story reported that he was "superseded on the most-wanted list by Osama bin Laden" after 9/11 and so ranked only second among "the most wanted militants in the world."

The terminology is accurate enough, according to the rules of Anglo-American discourse, which defines "the world" as the political class in Washington and London (and whoever happens to agree with them on specific matters). It is common, for example, to read that "the world" fully supported George Bush when he ordered the bombing of Afghanistan. That may be true of "the world," but hardly of the world, as revealed in an international Gallup Poll after the bombing was announced. Global support was slight. In Latin America, which has some experience with U.S. behavior, support ranged from 2% in Mexico to 16% in Panama, and that support was conditional upon the culprits being identified (they still weren't eight months later, the FBI reported), and civilian targets being spared (they were attacked at once). There was an overwhelming preference in the world for diplomatic/judicial measures, rejected out of hand by "the world."

Following the Terror Trail

In the present case, if "the world" were extended to the world, we might find some other candidates for the honor of most hated arch-criminal. It is instructive to ask why this might be true.

The *Financial Times* reports that most of the charges against Moughniyeh are unsubstantiated, but "one of the very few times when his involvement can be ascertained with certainty [is in] the hijacking of a TWA plane in 1985 in which a U.S. Navy diver was killed." This was one of two terrorist atrocities the led a poll of newspaper editors to select terrorism in the Middle East as the top story of 1985; the other was the hijacking of the passenger liner *Achille Lauro*, in which a crippled American, Leon Klinghoffer, was brutally murdered,. That reflects the judgment of "the world." It may be that the world saw matters somewhat differently.

The *Achille Lauro* hijacking was a retaliation for the bombing of Tunis ordered a week earlier by Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres. His air force killed 75 Tunisians and Palestinians with smart bombs that tore them to shreds, among other atrocities, as vividly reported from the scene by the prominent Israeli journalist Amnon Kapeliouk. Washington cooperated by failing to warn its ally Tunisia that the bombers were on the way, though the Sixth Fleet and U.S. intelligence could not have been unaware of the impending attack. Secretary of State George Shultz informed Israeli Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir that Washington "had considerable sympathy for the Israeli action," which he termed "a legitimate response" to "terrorist attacks," to general approbation. A few days later, the UN Security Council unanimously denounced the bombing as an "act of armed aggression" (with the U.S. abstaining). "Aggression" is, of course, a far more serious crime than international terrorism. But giving the United States and Israel the benefit of the doubt, let us keep to the lesser charge against their leadership.

Achille Lauro

A few days after, Peres went to Washington to consult with the leading international terrorist of the day, Ronald Reagan, who denounced "the evil scourge of terrorism," again with general acclaim by "the world."

The "terrorist attacks" that Shultz and Peres offered as the pretext for the bombing of Tunis were the killings of three Israelis in Larnaca, Cyprus. The killers, as Israel conceded, had nothing to do with Tunis, though they might have had Syrian connections. Tunis was a preferable target, however. It was defenseless, unlike Damascus. And there was an extra pleasure: more exiled Palestinians could be killed there.

The Larnaca killings, in turn, were regarded as retaliation by the perpetrators: They were a response to regular Israeli hijackings in international waters in which many victims were killed -- and many more kidnapped and sent to prisons in Israel, commonly to be held without charge for long periods. The most notorious of these has been the secret prison/torture chamber Facility 1391. A good deal can be learned about it from the Israeli and foreign press. Such regular Israeli crimes are, of course, known to editors of the national press in the U.S., and occasionally receive some casual mention.

Klinghoffer's murder was properly viewed with horror, and is very famous. It was the topic of an acclaimed opera and a made-for-TV movie, as well as much shocked commentary deploring the savagery of Palestinians -- "two-headed beasts" (Prime Minister Menachem Begin), "drugged roaches scurrying around in a bottle" (Chief of Staff Raful Eitan), "like grasshoppers compared to us," whose heads should be "smashed against the boulders and walls" (Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir). Or more commonly just "*Araboushim*," the slang counterpart of "kike" or "nigger."

Thus, after a particularly depraved display of settler-military terror and purposeful humiliation in the West Bank town of Halhul in December 1982, which disgusted even Israeli hawks, the well-known military/political analyst Yoram Peri wrote in dismay that one "task of the army today [is] to demolish the rights of innocent people just because they are Araboushim living in territories that God promised to us," a task that became far more urgent, and was carried out with far more brutality, when the Araboushim began to "raise their heads" a few years later.

We can easily assess the sincerity of the sentiments expressed about the Klinghoffer murder. It is only necessary to investigate the reaction to comparable U.S.-backed Israeli crimes. Take, for example, the murder in April 2002 of two crippled Palestinians, Kemal Zughayer and Jamal Rashid, by Israeli forces rampaging through the refugee camp of Jenin in the West Bank. Zughayer's crushed body and the remains of his wheelchair were found by British reporters, along with the remains of the white flag he was holding when he was shot dead while seeking to flee the Israeli tanks which then drove over him, ripping his face in two and severing his arms and legs. Jamal Rashid was crushed in *his* wheelchair when one of Israel's huge U.S.-supplied Caterpillar bulldozers demolished his home in Jenin with his family inside. The differential reaction, or rather non-reaction, has become so routine and so easy to explain that no further commentary is necessary.

Car Bomb

Plainly, the 1985 Tunis bombing was a vastly more severe terrorist crime than the *Achille Lauro* hijacking, or the crime for which Moughniyeh's "involvement can be ascertained with certainty" in the same year. But even the Tunis bombing had competitors for the prize for worst terrorist atrocity in the Mideast in the peak year of 1985.

One challenger was a car-bombing in Beirut right outside a mosque, timed to go off as worshippers were leaving Friday prayers. It killed 80 people and wounded 256. Most of the dead were girls and women, who had been leaving the mosque, though the ferocity of the blast "burned babies in their beds," "killed a bride buying her trousseau," and "blew away three children as they walked home from the mosque." It also "devastated the main street of the densely populated" West Beirut suburb, reported Nora Boustany three years later in the *Washington Post*.

The intended target had been the Shi'ite cleric Sheikh Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, who escaped. The bombing was carried out by Reagan's CIA and his Saudi allies, with Britain's help, and was specifically authorized by CIA Director William Casey, according to *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward's account in his book *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987*. Little is known beyond the bare facts, thanks to rigorous adherence to the doctrine that we do not investigate our own crimes (unless they become too prominent to suppress, and the inquiry can be limited to some low-level "bad apples" who were naturally "out of control").

"Terrorist Villagers"

A third competitor for the 1985 Mideast terrorism prize was Prime Minister Peres' "Iron Fist" operations in southern Lebanese territories then occupied by Israel in violation of Security Council orders. The targets were what the Israeli high command called "terrorist villagers." Peres's crimes in this case sank to new depths of "calculated brutality and arbitrary murder" in the words of a Western diplomat familiar with the area, an assessment amply supported by direct coverage. They are, however, of no interest to "the world" and therefore remain uninvestigated, in accordance with the usual conventions. We might well ask whether these crimes fall under international terrorism or the far more severe crime of aggression, but let us again give the benefit of the doubt to Israel and its backers in Washington and keep to the lesser charge.

These are a few of the thoughts that might cross the minds of people elsewhere in the world, even if not those of "the world," when considering "one of the very few times" Imad Moughniyeh was clearly implicated in a terrorist crime.

The U.S. also accuses him of responsibility for devastating double suicide truck-bomb attacks on U.S. Marine and French paratrooper barracks in Lebanon in 1983, killing 241 Marines and 58 paratroopers, as well as a prior attack on the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, killing 63, a particularly serious blow because of a meeting there of CIA officials at the time.

8th Marines Headquarters in Beirut following October 3, 1983 car bombing

The *Financial Times* has, however, attributed the attack on the Marine barracks to Islamic Jihad, not Hizbollah. Fawaz Gerges, one of the leading scholars on the *jihadi* movements and on Lebanon, has written that responsibility was taken by an "unknown group called Islamic Jihad." A voice speaking in classical Arabic called for all Americans to leave Lebanon or face death. It has been claimed that Moughniyeh was the head of Islamic Jihad at the time, but to my knowledge, evidence is sparse.

The opinion of the world has not been sampled on the subject, but it is possible that there might be some hesitancy about calling an attack on a military base in a foreign country a "terrorist attack," particularly when U.S. and French forces were carrying out heavy naval bombardments and air strikes in Lebanon, and shortly after the U.S. provided decisive support for the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which killed some 20,000 people and devastated the south, while leaving much of Beirut in ruins. It was finally called off by President Reagan when international protest became too intense to ignore after the Sabra-Shatila massacres.

In the United States, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon is regularly described as a reaction to Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) terrorist attacks on northern Israel from their Lebanese bases, making our crucial contribution to these major war crimes understandable. In the real world, the Lebanese border area had been quiet for a year, apart from repeated Israeli attacks, many of them murderous, in an effort to elicit some PLO response that could be used as a pretext for the already planned invasion. Its actual purpose was not concealed at the time by Israeli commentators and leaders: to safeguard the Israeli takeover of the occupied West Bank. It is of some interest that the sole serious error in Jimmy Carter's book *Palestine: Peace not Apartheid* is the repetition of this propaganda concoction about PLO attacks from Lebanon being the motive for the Israeli invasion. The book was bitterly attacked, and desperate efforts were made to find some phrase that could be misinterpreted, but this glaring error -- the only one -- was ignored. Reasonably, since it satisfies the criterion of adhering to useful doctrinal fabrications.

Killing without Intent

Another allegation is that Moughniyeh "masterminded" the bombing of Israel's embassy in Buenos Aires on March 17, 1992, killing 29 people, in response, as the *Financial Times* put it, to Israel's "assassination of former Hizbollah leader Abbas Al-Mussawi in an air attack in southern Lebanon." About the assassination, there is no need for evidence: Israel proudly took credit for it. The world might have some interest in the rest of the story. Al-Mussawi was murdered with a U.S.-supplied helicopter, well north of Israel's illegal "security zone" in southern Lebanon. He was on his way to Sidon from the village of Jibshit, where he had spoken at the memorial for another Imam murdered by Israeli forces. The helicopter attack also killed his wife and five-year old child. Israel then employed U.S.-supplied helicopters to attack a car bringing survivors of the first attack to a hospital.

After the murder of the family, Hezbollah "changed the rules of the game," Prime Minister Rabin informed the Israeli Knesset. Previously, no rockets had been launched at Israel. Until then, the rules of the game had been that Israel could launch murderous attacks anywhere in Lebanon at will, and Hizbollah would respond only within Israeli-occupied Lebanese territory.

After the murder of its leader (and his family), Hizbollah began to respond to Israeli crimes in Lebanon by rocketing northern Israel. The latter is, of course, intolerable terror, so Rabin launched an invasion that drove some 500,000 people out of their homes and killed well over 100. The merciless Israeli attacks reached as far as northern Lebanon.

Beirut under Israeli attack in 2006

In the south, 80% of the city of Tyre fled and Nabatiye was left a "ghost town," Jibshit was about 70% destroyed according to an Israeli army spokesperson, who explained that the intent was "to destroy the village completely because of its importance to the Shi'ite population of southern Lebanon." The goal was "to wipe the villages from the face of the earth and sow destruction around them," as a senior officer of the Israeli northern command described the operation.

Jibshit may have been a particular target because it was the home of Sheikh Abdul Karim Obeid, kidnapped and brought to Israel several years earlier. Obeid's home "received a direct hit from a missile," British journalist Robert Fisk reported, "although the Israelis were presumably gunning for his wife and three children." Those who had not escaped hid in terror, wrote Mark Nicholson in the *Financial Times*, "because any visible movement inside or outside their houses is likely to attract the attention of Israeli artillery spotters, who… were pounding their shells repeatedly and devastatingly into selected targets." Artillery shells were hitting some villages at a rate of more than 10 rounds a minute at times.

All of this received the firm support of President Bill Clinton, who understood the need to instruct the *Araboushim* sternly on the "rules of the game." And Rabin emerged as another grand hero and man of peace, so different from the two-legged beasts, grasshoppers, and drugged roaches.

This is only a small sample of facts that the world might find of interest in connection with the alleged responsibility of Moughniyeh for the retaliatory terrorist act in Buenos Aires.

Other charges are that Moughniyeh helped prepare Hizbollah defenses against the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, evidently an intolerable terrorist crime by the standards of "the world," which understands that the United States and its clients must face no impediments in their just terror and aggression.

The more vulgar apologists for U.S. and Israeli crimes solemnly explain that, while Arabs purposely kill people, the U.S. and Israel, being democratic societies, do not intend to do so. Their killings are just accidental ones, hence not at the level of moral depravity of their adversaries. That was, for example, the stand of Israel's High Court when it recently authorized severe collective punishment of the people of Gaza by depriving them of electricity (hence water, sewage disposal, and other such basics of civilized life).

The same line of defense is common with regard to some of Washington's past peccadilloes, like the destruction in 1998 of the al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Sudan. The attack apparently led to the deaths of tens of thousands of people, but without intent to kill them, hence not a crime on the order of intentional killing -- so we are instructed by moralists who consistently suppress the response that had already been given to these vulgar efforts at self-justification.

To repeat once again, we can distinguish three categories of crimes: murder with intent, accidental killing, and murder with foreknowledge but without specific intent. Israeli and U.S. atrocities typically fall into the third category. Thus, when Israel destroys Gaza's power supply or sets up barriers to travel in the West Bank, it does not specifically intend to murder the particular people who will die from polluted water or in ambulances that cannot reach hospitals. And when Bill Clinton ordered the bombing of the al-Shifa plant, it was obvious that it would lead to a humanitarian catastrophe. Human Rights Watch immediately informed him of this, providing details; nevertheless, he and his advisers did not intend to kill specific people among those who would inevitably die when half the pharmaceutical supplies were destroyed in a poor African country that could not replenish them.

Rather, they and their apologists regarded Africans much as we do the ants we crush while walking down a street. We are aware that it is likely to happen (if we bother to think about it), but we do not intend to kill them because they are not worthy of such consideration. Needless to say, comparable attacks by *Araboushim* in areas inhabited by human beings would be regarded rather differently.

If, for a moment, we can adopt the perspective of the world, we might ask which criminals are "wanted the world over."

Noam Chomsky is the author of numerous best-selling political works. His latest books are Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy and What We Say Goes, a conversation book with David Barsamian, both in the American Empire Project series at Metropolitan Books. The Essential Chomsky (edited by Anthony Arnove), a collection of his writings on politics and on language from the 1950s to the present, has just been published by the New Press.

This article was published at TomDispatch on February 26, 2008. It is republished at Japan Focus on February 26, 2008.