



The 'Poison Fruits' of the Anglo-American Empire w/ Professor Jeffrey Sachs

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Dimitri Lascaris (DL): This is Dimitri Lascaris coming to you from Kalamata, Greece on April 16th, 2025, and today I'm very pleased to be joined again by Professor Jeffrey Sachs from Columbia University, an economist and geopolitical analyst. From 2001 to 2018 he was special advisor to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. And he was also an economic advisor to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and his successor, Russian President Boris Yeltsin. And he is today in the streets of Florence, where there are some unusual distractions. Thank you very much for joining us today.

Jeffrey Sachs (JS): It's a pleasure to be with you. Thank you.

DL: This past weekend, you gave a widely watched speech at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum on the recent history of Syria and CIA interference in Syria. And before I ask you about that speech, I'd like to read to you an excerpt from a Human Rights Watch report about another country in the region, Egypt. And this report was issued in September, 2017 by Human Rights Watch entitled: *Egypt's Assembly Line of Torture*. The report states, "Under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt's regular police and national security officers routinely torture political detainees with techniques including beatings, electric shocks, stress positions, and sometimes rapes with widespread impunity". Now, two years later at a summit held in France, President Trump openly referred to al-Sisi as my favourite dictator. In September of last year, the Biden administration announced U.S. \$1.3 billion in military aid to Egypt, and waived a conditionality related to human rights respect in relation to Egypt. So returning to the subject of Syria, we've been told repeatedly that the U.S. and other Western powers imposed severe sanctions on the country and bombed and occupied parts of it for the protection of human rights. In your view, was the human rights record of Bashar al-Assad worse than that of Donald Trump's favorite dictator, or for that matter, other autocrats in the region, such as the Saudi monarchy?

JS: Look, this is not the question that I'm engaged in. I'm engaged in the question of the U.S. overthrowing the governments in other countries. That's the policy that I oppose. And I oppose the U.S. assigning the CIA the role of so-called regime change operations of

overthrowing other governments. That's what I was discussing in Antalya. In 2011 or 2012, because we don't know all the details until this moment, we know that Obama said in August 2011 Bashar al-Assad must go. In my view, that is an incorrect policy period of the United States. We know, apparently, in 2012, the order was signed to the CIA in Operation Timber Sycamore to overthrow Assad. It led to essentially 14 years of mass bloodshed and about 600,000 people dying. It is one of dozens and dozens of U.S. regime change operations, and that's what I oppose. I do not believe the United States should be in the business of overthrowing other governments.

DL: Now, in a recent meeting between Benjamin Netanyahu and President Trump in the White House, it happened about two weeks ago, Benjamin Netanyahu had occasion to comment upon the presence of Turkish forces in Syria. And he suggested, as did a recent op-ed in the Jerusalem Post, that the presence of military forces on the part of Turkey in Syria poses a security threat to Israel. What is your understanding or view about the objectives of the Turkish government in regard to Syria, and do you believe that they pose a security threat to Israel as is being claimed by the Israeli government?

JS: I think Israel poses the greatest threat in the neighbourhood. It kills Palestinians in large numbers. It rejects any kind of a two-state solution, and it is now occupying parts of Lebanon and Syria. It has instigated U.S. wars repeatedly throughout the region. So, I think that the big challenge in the Middle East is that the obvious way to peace, as the Arab Peace Initiative has made clear for 23 years, as the Saudis have made clear, as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation have made it clear, is that there should be a state of Palestine alongside the state of Israel. This is international law. It's been the policy of the UN Security Council for decades. But Benjamin Netanyahu's government resists it. It demands that there will never be a state of Palestine, that Israel will rule over the entire territory, that Israel would make Gaza unlivable. Israel has killed tens of thousands of innocent civilians in the past years, and this is why we don't have peace in the Middle East, in my opinion.

DL: In that same meeting, Benjamin Netanyahu raised the subject of Iran, and he cited the example of Libya and said that he preferred a diplomatic solution, as was done in the case of Libya, to the issue of nuclear weapons. And at the time, I must say, Professor Sachs, when I heard that comment, I didn't imagine it was going to inspire a lot of confidence in the Iranian government, given what ultimately happened to Libya. Could you comment about the objectives of the Trump administration in Israel with respect to these negotiations that are ongoing? We are told that it is about nuclear weapons acquisition, but the U.S. intelligence agencies in their 2025 threat assessment said that they don't believe that the Iranian government is seeking a nuclear weapon. So is this really about nuclear weapons? Is it more than that? And do you think that the U.S. administration is likely to achieve its objectives in this negotiation?

JS: We already had a successful negotiation with Iran to end their nuclear weapons programme. It was called the JCPOA, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, agreed with the United States and Iran and several other countries in 2016. Donald Trump under the weight of the Israel lobby and Netanyahu tore it up in 2017. So we already had an agreement.

Now, there's talk of another negotiation. Netanyahu would like the United States to go to war with Iran. This would be perhaps the trigger to World War III. Netanyahu is a warmonger, a war maniac. He wants the entire Middle East basically to be suborned or crushed so that Israel has no challenge to its Greater Israel policy. To my mind, this is the opposite of world interests and the opposite of U.S. interests. So Israel is interested to try to instigate a U.S. attack on Iran. The U.S. interest should be to find a peace with Iran in which there would be no nuclear programme, but there would be security for Iran and there would be security for the two-state solution for both Palestinians and Israelis. This should be the aim. It's perfectly achievable. It's not Netanyahu's goal though.

DL: Do you think that the administration is going to try to obtain some kind of dismantling of Iran's conventional ballistic missile capability and assurances that Iran will not support resistance groups in the region?

JS: Well, those are issues for negotiation. Iran is not going to leave itself defenceless, and the so-called Libyan solution is, get a country to give up its nuclear programme and then bomb it to death. So the Libyan solution is no solution. I don't know whether Netanyahu said that with his evil smirk or with his cruelty or with his stupidity, nastiness. I don't know what the meaning of that statement was, but the so-called Libyan solution is perfectly plain to see. It was a country on Netanyahu's list for the United States to go to war. The United States did Israel's bidding. It went to war with Libya. The result has been, since 2011, ongoing chaos in that country. That's Netanyahu's recipe. There's chaos in Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, maybe a little bit less, but there was a long period of chaos. And that's the Netanyahu strategy. I personally think it's the opposite of American foreign policy interests, but the Israel lobby is very strong.

DL: So I'd like to put to you a hypothetical, Professor Sachs, and I realise that this is a complex, difficult question, but I think it would be enlightening to hear your thoughts on this. And that is, you know, back in the aftermath of the First World War, the Woodrow Wilson government sent two prominent Americans by the name of King and Crane to survey attitudes in the Arab region about the disposition of territories of the Ottoman Empire. And what they found was not only that there was overwhelming opposition to design this project, but they also found that there was even stronger feeling about a united East Arabia, which effectively would have encompassed Jordan, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. And with that as background, I'm curious about your thoughts about this question. If in fact the U.S. government and other Western governments were to adopt a policy of strict non-interference in the affairs of West Asia – so, for example, no more military bases, no more economic sanctions, no provision of military aid to undemocratic regimes – what is your best sense of the kind of countries that would emerge from that if the people had the ability to pursue the kind societies that they want? What kind of region do you think would emerge from a policy of non-interference by the West?

JS: Well, in general, we should understand that the Middle East is, as in so many problems in the world, the fruits of the British Empire. Britain promised the same territory three times over to the Arabs in the McMahon letters to France in the Sykes-Picot Treaty, and to the Jews

in the Balfour Declaration. This is typical British deceit. And in so many places in the world, not only in the Middle East, but in East Asia, in Africa, you see the long legacy of the British Empire. So we have a mess that's a century old. Basically, after the 1919 Versailles Treaty, Britain manipulated the region; all through the region. It never allowed truly sovereign states. France did its imperial job as well. After 1945, the United States was the dominant empire in the region. There's never been the ability of these states to have their own sovereignty, their own governments, and for the Arab world to come together in a coherent way. When Arab leaders have arisen calling for Arab solidarity, like Gamal Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s, they naturally became the enemy of the United States. Empires like Britain and the United States divide to conquer. This is, of course, a 2,000-year-old principle. It goes back before that, but it was enunciated as a Divide et Impera by the Romans, and that's the American strategy: Never allow, really, a bottom-up solidarity to develop; always divide. Always try to pick off one country or another.

And so, if there is a democracy, the United States tries to overthrow it, like it did in Iran in 1953. This has nothing to do with democracy, non-democracy. This has to do with power. This has to do with the U.S. being the empire of the region. And I'm hoping that the Arab world gets together in a unified way and tells the United States, you're the only obstacle to peace. You have to accept the state of Palestine. You have to stop using your veto in the UN Security Council, which is blocking the Palestinian state. The U.S. is the only obstacle to a Palestinian state in the world. The reason I say that as well, Israel is dead set against it, Israel can't stop it. Israel has no veto over Palestinian rights, quite the contrary. The International Court of Justice was very clear in 2024 that international laws are on the side of Palestine. The United Nations General Assembly is very clear about this. The UN Security Council is very clear about this, but for the U.S. veto. So this is what I'm hoping that the Arab world speaks clearly. It has been, by the way. It's just that we deliberately don't hear it. But since 2002, it's been calling for peace, for normalisation with Israel on the basis of a two-state solution. That's the Arab Peace Initiative. The organisation of Islamic cooperation with the 57 Muslim majority countries is on side with this. More than 180 countries in the United Nations are on side with this, Israel is against it, because it wants Greater Israel, and the United States has been basically pulled along by the Israel lobby up until now.

DL: My last question to you, Professor Sachs, relates to the administration's policies with respect to university institutions in the United States. You know, on a narrow interpretation of what's going on, it's all about suppressing the right to defend the Palestinian cause on the university campuses in the United States, but one might also view this as part of a broader assault on academic freedom. As a professor at a highly esteemed institution in the United States, what is your view of this? Do you think it is a broader assault on the academic movement that is coming?

JS: Well, first, it has nothing to do with antisemitism. This is all about the Israel-Palestine issue, which is completely different from issues of antisemitism, so this has nothing to do with antisemitism. That's Trumped up, if I may say so. It's a kind of absurd claim, because the issues of geopolitics are not about antisemitism. They're about how to find peace in the

Middle East. So this is the first point. Second, the administration is trying to operate through fear. It's dragging students out of their dorm rooms in the middle of the night. It is arresting students when they go to show up for a naturalisation hearing. It's absolutely something that is really despicable, really awful. And then there is a broader assault on the universities, which is, I think, best characterised as a kind of American-style cultural revolution. We're in the midst of a culture war that, like you say, transcends any of the particular topics that might be associated with this. This is a culture war. We know when China had its culture war, the universities were closed, the country was set back terribly, there was a lot of violence and unrest, and the U.S. is in a culture war right now. It's very sad to see.

DL: Well, thank you very much, Professor Sachs, for taking the time out from your visit to Florence. I much appreciate it.

JS: Very good to be with you. Appreciate it, too.

DL: I wish you safe travel.

JS: Thank you so much.

DL: Thank you.

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