

*Irene Gendzier*

## The Political Legacy of Edward Said

by  
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In the fall of 2002, before the U.S. led the invasion of Iraq, the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* ran an article by Akiva Eldar on a meeting held in Washington for some members of the Pentagon. The host was Richard Perle, then Chair of the U.S. Defense Policy Board. The sponsor was an unnamed think tank. The subject was the future shape of the Middle East. The slide show depicted "Iraq: a tactical goal, Saudi Arabia: a strategic goal," as well as describing "Palestine is Israel, Jordan is Palestine, and Iraq is the Hashemite Kingdom."<sup>1</sup>

Several months later, a leading Palestinian doctor and grassroots activist, Mustafa Barghouthi, Director of the Health Development and Information Policy Institute, in Ramallah, appeared to confirm the ominous "visions" described earlier in Washington. Denouncing "Israeli measures taken against the Palestinians," as "perhaps more dangerous than those taken in 1948," Barghouthi observed that, "under Sharon's plan for the Palestinians, they may now be clustered in ghettos over no more than 9% of historic Palestine."<sup>2</sup>

In the interval, a handful of Israeli journalists and activists regularly denounced the very same Israeli policies, demonstrating their solidarity across the landscape of checkpoints and ghettos, pointing, as did Gideon Levy, to the role of the Israeli military in promoting the progressive dehumanization of the Palestinians.<sup>3</sup>

It is safe to say that among consumers of the news in the U.S., none of the above sources constituted familiar fare. Outside of a minority of specialists and concerned activists and intellectuals, reports exposing Israeli policies against Palestinians were viewed with suspicion if not open disdain,

particularly as both the Israeli and American administrations vied with each other in identifying Israel with the U.S., and Palestinians with Arab terrorists. The struggle to maintain this status quo in public opinion was not new, and unfortunately, it was not news. It remained a battle fought at public and private levels, one directed at universities, the media and offices of Congressional representatives and political candidates. The object, preventing Americans from confronting Israeli policies, including those exposed by Israeli dissidents.

Representing a challenge to such developments, including the persistent myths of “road maps” and elusive peace processes, have been the voices of those raised in support of a binational state encompassing Israel and Palestine. Among those who endorsed such an option was Edward Said, whose endorsement was matched with support for the National Political Initiative in Palestine, involving major social and political reform. The combination constitutes an ineradicable check to Israeli denial of Palestinian rights. It offers, as well, an alternative to nationalist solutions that Said argued, were no longer tenable, although they required recognition within a new framework.

Said’s recent writings on these questions are considered below. They speak to political realities in the Palestinian landscape that remain little known and inadequately appreciated. And they do so by giving voice to “emerging alternatives” as Said described them, those that reveal the dogged determination of hope and human solidarity as the bases of a Palestinian and Israeli future, unlike the past.

A LEADING LITERARY CRITIC AND ACADEMIC, AND MUSICIAN, the roster of Said’s interests and publications cannot be easily summarized, neither can the range of his writings that dealt with matters of culture, politics and resistance. Suffice it to note that in the political domain, Said was recognized as among the most articulate and passionate spokesmen for the Palestinian cause, a subject that his work effectively internationalized beyond the parameters that defined its origins in the Middle East.

Said’s political trajectory took him from the role of unengaged bystander which ended with the Israeli-Arab war of 1967. Between 1977 and 1991, he became an independent member of the Palestine National Council, choosing to leave in the later year after which he resumed his activism on behalf of

Palestine as independent critic, fully armed with the only weapon that defined him, his words.

In the interval, Said published his first major work, *Orientalism* (1978) and in the following year, *The Question of Palestine*, followed two years later by *Covering Islam*, and in 1983, *The Word, the Text and the Critic*, a work whose production coincided with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, a period of grief and suffering for Lebanese and for Palestinians in the Sabra and Shattila refugee camps, who were massacred by Israeli-backed Phalangist forces. The events led to a major inquiry in Israel, including an investigation of the role of Ariel Sharon. Said's writings on 1982 are to be found throughout his works, attesting to his eloquent defense of Palestinians under siege, and of those Lebanese, defeated in their struggle for a secular, democratic state.

Said's literary and political output reflected his conviction that the worlds of politics and culture were not severed but rather parts of a whole whose integrity could not be ignored, as works such as *Culture and Imperialism*, and *The Politics of Dispossession*, made clear.

The remarks that follow focus on some of Said's more recent political writings, those in which he argued against separation and the myths of the "peace process," and for bi-nationalism, as well as for the Palestinian Initiative, the ground-breaking grassroots movement that he and other Palestinian professionals, intellectuals and independent political figures endorsed in the summer of 2002.

None of the above can be analyzed outside of the context of Said's political writings, and notably, his insistence on challenging the Israeli denial of the role of Zionism and Israeli policy in the Palestinian exile of 1948. Implicit in such a challenge was the demand that the "Palestinian narrative," be integrated into that of Israeli history. It is in this context that Said's writings on "invention, memory and place," on history and memory, can be situated. In the 1980s he recognized the parallel efforts of Israeli journalists and historians who broke with the apologetic narratives of the past, a development he followed closely from its inception.

"In my opinion," Said wrote, referring to those Israelis who contributed to such efforts, "their genesis lay to some considerable extent in the aggravated, but close colonial encounter between Israelis and Palestinians in the occupied

territories.”<sup>4</sup>Such encounters, he argued, when not undermined by separation and exclusion, permitted the apprehension of the suffering of each community by the other.

These were themes to which Said repeatedly returned, even as he denounced the utter imbalance of political and military power between Israel and Palestine, whose effects on Palestinian life were increasingly dire.

In his January 1999 article, “Truth and Reconciliation,” written for the Egyptian weekly *Al Ahrām*, January 14-20, Said wrote, referring to Oslo, that it was time again to question the so-called peace process that had brought no peace. “It is my view that the peace process has in fact put off the real reconciliation that must occur if the 100 year war between Zionism and the Palestinian people is to end. Oslo set the stage for separation, but real peace can come only with a binational Israeli-Palestinian state.” This, he continued, was scarcely imaginable. At present, both Zionist-Israeli and Palestine “narratives” he insisted, were “irreconcilable.” Reviewing Zionist history in the recent work of Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell, Said pointed out that the founders of the Zionist movement had not been blind to the presence of Palestinians, or to the “insurmountable contradictions between the basic objectives of the two sides,” referring to the Zionist movement and Palestinian national movement. At present, he explained, “the conflict appears intractable because it is a contest over the same land by two peoples who believed they had valid title to it and who hoped that the other side would in time give up or go away. One side won the war, the other lost, but the contest is as alive as ever.”

Deeply familiar with internal Israeli politics, and with the courageous struggle of Israeli dissidents, Said argued, “I see no other way than to begin now to speak about sharing the land that has thrust us together, sharing it in a truly democratic way, with equal rights for each citizen. There can be no reconciliation unless both peoples, two communities of suffering, resolve that their existence is a secular fact, and that it has to be dealt with as such.”

In that frame of mind, he questioned: “What can separation mean?” in November 1999 (*Al Ahrām*, 11-17 November), making it clear that he believed separation to be unworkable. The dream of a Palestinian state, he wrote, was no longer realizable under current conditions. Neither were Israeli efforts at separation. “Neither Palestinians nor Israelis can be made distant from the other. In the area between Ramallah in the north and Bethlehem in

the south, 800,000 Israelis and Palestinians live on top of each other, and cannot be separated.”

Instead of considering partition as the route to independence, he argued that it was “a legacy of imperialism,” as ominous in its effects in Pakistan and India, Ireland or Cyprus, or the Balkans, as in historic Palestine.

“We must adopt a strategy with like-minded Israelis—this is a crucial alliance—on matters where we have similar interests: secular rights, anti-settlement activities, education and equality before the law, whether it is Palestinian law, which is anti-democratic, or Israeli law, which is equally anti-democratic when it comes to non-Jews as well as secular Jews.” He wrote, he explained, “in order to be heard by other Arabs and other Israelis, those whose vision can extend beyond the impoverishing perspectives of what partition and separation can offer.”

In the period following the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000, which coincided with the emergence of the George W. Bush administration, and the return of Ariel Sharon as Likud Prime Minister, Said was unrelenting in his expose of the hypocrisy of American claims and the denial of Israeli violence and continued expansion into the West Bank and Gaza. He continued to argue on behalf of a political solution of the crisis, albeit one that represented the interests of Palestinians as well as Israelis, a situation belied by the Oslo negotiations. In works such as *Peace and Its Discontents* (1996) and *The End of the Peace Process* (2000), Said excoriated the role of the Palestinian leadership, notably in its accession to the Oslo Declaration of Principles (1993), which Said viewed as “an instrument of capitulation.”<sup>5</sup> It would have been preferable, he wrote, to acknowledge that “we have failed as a people in our struggle to restore our rights. Israel has maintained its settlements and very partially redeployed its army. It controls land, water, security, and foreign policy for the Palestinian ‘self-rule’ authority.”

Instead of declaring victory, Said maintained, the Palestinian leadership should have confronted its defeat. “How much more dignified and admirable it would have been to admit defeat and ask the Palestinian people to rally in order to try to rebuild from the ruins.” (xxx) Said’s criticism of the Palestinian leadership and its lack of preparedness, its ignorance of the U.S., was unambiguous, as was his recognition of the utter disparities in power on which such accords rested. What Palestinians and Arabs must remember, he argued, was “that our desire to coexist in peace with each other and with our

neighbors is sustained not by blind loyalty to one or two personalities and their rhetoric, but by an abiding faith in real justice and real-self-determination.” (xxv)

Said’s appraisal of Oslo was compatible with that offered by Israeli historian, Baruch Kimmerling, who underscored the compromised agreement made in Oslo which left Palestinians in control of bantustans. As for Sharon, Kimmerling argued that “Israel has become a state oriented towards one major goal: the politicide of the Palestinian people. Politicide is a process whose ultimate aim is to destroy a certain people’s prospects—indeed, their very will—for legitimate self-determination and sovereignty over land they consider their homeland.”<sup>6</sup>

Said had supported the two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which the Palestine Liberation Organization had formally adopted as its position at the Palestine National Council meeting in 1988. In a series of interviews with the Israeli journalist, Ari Shavit, recorded in August 2000, Said explained his current position. As Shavit observed: “It seems you’ve come full circle—from espousing a one secular-democratic state solution in the 70s, to accepting the two-state solution in the 80s, back to the secular-democratic idea.”<sup>7</sup> Said replied that partition and separation were no longer workable. In its place, he turned to bi-nationalism. Replying to Shavit, he answered:

I would not necessarily call it secular-democratic. I would call it a bi-national state. I want to preserve for the Palestinians and the Israeli Jews a mechanism or structure that would allow them to express their national identity. I understand that in the case of Palestine-Israel, a bi-national solution would have to address the difference between the two collectives.

Those differences were daily magnified by the continued struggle on the ground whose consequences Said relentlessly exposed: the increasing number of Israeli military checkpoints that defined Palestinian ghettos, the mounting death toll, the numbers of those rendered homeless, the expansion of Israeli settlements in violation of U.S. and UN agreements. In the midst of increasing violence, wrote Said in *Al-Ahram* (December 19-25, 2002) and the continued bleeding of “the Palestinian civilian population,” that remained “obscured, hidden from view, though it continues steadily all the time: 65

percent unemployment, 50 percent poverty (people living on less than \$2 a day), schools, hospitals, universities, businesses under constant military pressure, these are only the outward manifestation of Israeli crimes against humanity.”

In the midst of such conditions, Said and other Palestinians turned their efforts to the state of “Palestinian and Arab politics,” which Said argued, had never been as corrupt, nor as harmful to its own populations as at the present time. He criticized Arab leaders, albeit not for the first time, for having failed to a “systematic strategy, much less even a systematic protest against Washington’s announced plans to re-draw the map of the Middle East after the invasion of Iraq.” Said’s sharp criticisms of Arab politics were not unique. They matched those of critics throughout the Arab world whose demands for social justice and secular political reform, were as little heard in the U.S., as were his own.

Said joined with other Palestinian signatories—including Dr. Mustapha Barghouti—cited earlier, to found a new secular Palestinian national initiative. The initiative, as Edward Said wrote in *Al Ahram*, in 19-25 December 2002, “puts forward the idea of a national unified authority, elected to serve the people and its need for liberation, for democratic freedoms, and for public debate and accountability.” It was supported by a host of professionals in the fields of health, education, and labor, along with political independents. “The old divisions between Fatah, the Popular Front, Hamas, and all the others, are meaningless today,” Said argued, calling for a Palestinian leadership capable of speaking “to our need for independence of mind and responsible, modern citizenship.”

This was not to be Said’s final contribution to the future of Palestine. In their last conversation, Ilan Pappé, the Israeli historian and activist whose work Said respected, reported that Said “beseeched me, as he did others I am sure, not to give up the struggle for relocating the Palestinians’ refugee issue at the heart of the public and global agenda. He stressed the need to continue the effort of changing the American public opinion on Palestine....”<sup>8</sup>

It remains to be seen whether such efforts have reached their audience.

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- <sup>1</sup> Akiva Eldar, "Perles of wisdom for the Faithful," *Ha'aretz*, Nov. 2, 2002.
- <sup>2</sup> Mustapha Barghouthi press conference, Oct. 16, 2003, Jerusalem, Israel.
- <sup>3</sup> Gideon Levy, "The IDF's Chorus of Incitement," *Ha'aretz*, Oct. 26, 2003 (online).
- <sup>4</sup> Edward W. Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," *Critical Inquiry*, 26, winter 2000, p.189.
- <sup>5</sup> Edward Said, *Peace and Its Discontents*, New York, Vintage Books, (1996), p.xxix; all subsequent citations, unless otherwise identified, are from this source.
- <sup>6</sup> Baruch Kimmerling on Ran Edelist, *Ehud Barak: Fighting the Demons*, in *New Left Review* 23, September-October 2003.
- <sup>7</sup> Edward Said, *Power, Politics, and Culture*, Pantheon Books, 2001, p.452. The interview is reproduced in ch. 29, "My Right of Return."
- <sup>8</sup> Ilan Pappé's tribute to Edward Saidm "A Lighthouse that Navigated Us," may be found in the online Edward Said archives, and in Arabic Media Internet Network, Sept. 26, 2003.