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EDWARD SAID MEMORIAL LECTURE



DELIVERED BY

DR GHADA KARMI

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For further information about the lecture please contact:

Dr Bassam Dally
Secretary, Steering Committee
Edward Said Memorial Lecture
The University of Adelaide
SA, 5005, Australia

Email: bassam.dally@adelaide.edu.au
Tel: +61-8-8303 5397
Fax: +61-8-8303 4367

ISRAEL'S DILEMMA IN PALESTINE: ORIGINS AND SOLUTIONS

Ghada Karmi

Tonight we are meeting some two weeks after the fourth anniversary of Edward Said's death. As the numerous obituaries, reminiscences and tributes of the time showed, he meant many things to many people. In fact just about everyone claimed to have met or seen or known him. Even those who hadn't met him in the flesh felt as if they had. That's not surprising, since his intellectual legacy encompassed history, literature, literary criticism and politics, and his presence was so vibrant in the flesh and on TV as to make one feel intimate with him. However, as a fellow Palestinian and a close contemporary, I want to focus on his significance in the Palestinian arena which animated so much of his life and work and inspired me as well as many others.

For Palestinians, his principal achievement was his skill at being their most articulate exponent. He was able to bridge the gap between them and the west on this most difficult of issues, to explain to a western audience reared on the Israeli narrative that there was another narrative, traditionally ignored and undermined, but valid and important. He tried and succeeded in overturning many pre-conceived notions about the Palestinian predicament with Israel, its real origins and remedies. It is no fault of his that the effect of his work was to make many western observers tie their understanding of the Palestinian position to his person, rather than extend it towards the rest of his countrymen and women. This was to be expected, given his charisma, intelligence and compelling critique of current affairs.

I first met him in 1975 at a conference on Zionism and racism in the Libyan capital, when he was relatively unknown. We met again in New York in the wake of the publication of his groundbreaking book, *Orientalism*, and before it hit the headlines with the force that catapulted him to fame. Our friendship continued from then on, necessarily intermittent in view of the geographical distance between London and New York, and lasted until his death.

I wonder had he lived what he would make of Palestine today. How more fragmented our people have become, now further split into Fateh and Hamas followers in the West Bank and Gaza respectively, how much more Israel dominates Palestinian life, politics and land, and how more divided the Arab world has become, Sunni and Shia, Islamists and 'moderates', unable to help the Palestinians. In November, the US plans to hold a Middle East peace conference in Washington, to which Israel's prime minister, Ehud Olmert, and the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas are invited, along with the members of the 'Quartet', and several Arab states, it is not yet clear which ones. Strenuous attempts are being made to present this meeting as something momentous, a turning point, the first step on the road to peace, even though its remit is limited to statements of intent without negotiations and the participants are undefined.

The hollowness of the exercise is obvious to anyone who has followed the twists and turns of the tortuous and futile Middle East 'peace process'. It even moved the prominent Israeli journalist, Gideon Levy, to advise Abbas to stay at home, rather than humiliate himself and his people by attending this sham conference.¹ Said would surely have been in a despair equal to the one most of us feel at seeing the low ebb in Palestine's fortunes, not seen since the catastrophe of 1948.

¹ 'Puppet leader', *Haaretz* 24 September 2007.

I feel that the best tribute I can pay him is to follow in his footsteps. Like him, I learned early on that in order to understand the conflict today, one has to go back to its origins. And most importantly, this understanding was an essential pre-requisite to the search for a solution. In my researches and reflections on this issue, I was constantly struck by the dearth of Western concern for how Palestinians and Arabs felt about the creation and existence of Israel in their midst. These two issues impelled me to write my current book, *Married to another man: Israel's dilemma in Palestine*, a book that I like to think Said would have approved of. He had paid me the great compliment of endorsing my earlier book, a memoir entitled *In Search of Fatima: a Palestinian story*, in 2002, and I feel that perhaps he would have done the same for the current one.

Origins of the problem

What has led us to today's desperate situation? Why is the Israeli-Palestinians conflict so interminable and so difficult to solve? To answer the question we need to go back to the dawn of Zionism, the ideology that inspired the creation of Israel in Palestine. When the Zionists resolved in 1897 to establish a Jewish state in Palestine, they were aware that it was already home to an indigenous non-Jewish population, namely, Edward Said's ancestors and mine. The story goes that after the first Zionist Congress in 1897 the Zionists sent two rabbis to Palestine to assess its suitability for what they hoped would be the Jewish state. The rabbis reported back that, 'the bride is beautiful, but she is married to another man', in other words, Palestine was indeed a suitable place but it was already full of another people, the Palestinians.

So, how to create and maintain a state for another people in a land already inhabited? Squaring that circle has been the essence of Israel's dilemma ever since its establishment and the cause of the Palestinian tragedy that it led to. It could not have been otherwise, for what the Zionists envisaged was a project that was bizarre and, on the face of it, unworkable, that is, to set up an ethnically-defined collective for Jews on a land belonging to another people and to their exclusion. In addition, this new creation was supposed to prosper in perpetuity, irrespective of what opposition it may arouse in the natives.

It was inevitable that a project which depended on gaining possession of a land already inhabited by a people that Zionist ideology had defined as ethnically unacceptable could only have been realised by a mixture of force and coercion. To have any hope of long-term success, the new state thus created would have to maintain itself through constant military superiority and powerful backing by its creator, the West. The corollary to this was that the Arabs would have to remain too weak and disunited to offer much resistance, with the calculation that Israel's powerful army would demolish any that arose. (And that is how it has turned out, at least so far. Israel is armed to the teeth, including with nuclear weapons, and the Arab world is hopelessly disunited and now too weak to resist.)

This, in substance, is the Zionist project, whose main aims came to be realised in the creation of Israel in 1948, but which was never able to resolve the problem of Palestine's native inhabitants, 'the other man' of my book title. The problem, already foreseen by the two Viennese rabbis, was also clear to Zionism's earliest leaders. One of the most important of these, Vladimir (later, Zeev) Jabotinsky, put it well in 1923 in an article entitled 'The Iron Wall'.

‘Every indigenous people’, he wrote about the Palestinian Arabs’ expected reaction to the Zionist project, ‘will resist alien settlers as long as they see any hope of ridding themselves of the danger of foreign settlement’. A ‘voluntary’ agreement with the Palestinians was thus impossible. He ridiculed his fellow Zionists who thought such an agreement was a necessary condition of Zionism by saying that they might as well abandon the project. The alternative he advocated was for Zionist colonisation to develop ‘under the protection of a force independent of the local population – an iron wall which the native population cannot break through.’² (The iron wall refers to a wall of bayonets).

Jabotinsky was prescient. If the Zionists wanted a Jewish state in Palestine they had a choice: either to do so and crush native resistance forever or abandon the project altogether. Put another way, they wanted a state defined as one with a Jewish majority, but the existence of Palestine’s indigenous made that impossible, so there were only two options: to empty the land of its non-Jews or abandon the Zionist project. The Zionists chose the first option, which they have been trying to implement from 1948 up to the present day: to denude the land of its original inhabitants by every means possible. It led to the 1948 dispossession that made Palestinians into refugees, the campaign to erase their history from Palestine as if they had never been, a second expulsion in 1967, and thereafter a steady dribble of evictions for various petty reasons, and ongoing attempts to make the lives of those that remained in their homeland so intolerable that they would be forced to leave. Ilan Pappé has written a marvellous study of the methods that Israel used from even before 1948 to ‘cleanse’ Palestine of its native people.³

That a project to which such human suffering was integral should have been tolerated and even helped to flourish is remarkable. The British government, which first enabled Zionism to enter Palestine under a promise made in 1917 by Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, to a Zionist representative, Lord Rothschild, soon realised it had created a nightmare in Palestine. By permitting Jewish immigration into Palestine from Europe, it provoked local resistance and a continuous conflict between the Arab inhabitants of Palestine and the Jewish incomers into which the Mandate authorities were also drawn. It is unlikely that Britain would have gone on supporting the Zionist project after that, had it not been for the Nazi Holocaust, and it might have ended there. No Israel would have come into being, there would have been no expulsion of Palestinians and no conflict.

But the Holocaust completed the task of persuading Zionism’s Western sponsors that a haven for persecuted Jews was an imperative. And few people in the West have ever seriously disagreed with this proposition since then. It is inextricably bound up with the general perception of Palestine as the rightful and necessary home of the Jews, a view that runs very deep within the hearts and minds of virtually all Jews, however liberal, and a majority of others in the West. By a terrible irony the Holocaust rescued Zionism from oblivion and made the creation of Israel inevitable. Any doubts about the rightness of Israel became near sacrilege and the Palestinians have suffered the consequences ever since.

² Z. Jabotinsky, *Writings: On the Road to Jerusalem*. cited in A. Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), pp. 13--14. See also Leini Brenner, *The Iron Wall: Zionist Revisionism from Jabotinsky to Shamir* (London: Zed Books, 1984), pp. 73--5.

³ Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic cleansing of Palestine* Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007.

What it meant for Palestinians

The Palestinian case has been so effectively subsumed in the dominant Israeli narrative that they are not expected even to question or resist it. They and the rest of the Arab world are supposed to share everyone else's view of Israel as a moral project and not to object to its creation. Hence, Arab hostility to Israel appears mysterious or just spiteful and it has only been since the start of the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000, with the brutality of Israel's occupation exposed, that Palestinians have been legitimately permitted to object. The parameters of these objections, however, are strictly limited by an implicit consensus on what Palestinians can legitimately hope for: that Israel may be expected to ease its occupation and that the end of the process can be a Palestinian state of sorts in the post-1967 territories. The latter is regarded as the pinnacle of Palestinian ambition, with any claim to the land lost before 1967 totally excluded from the equation, as if there had been no Palestinian history before 1967 and Israel had always been a natural part of the landscape.

This is the subtext of the 'peace process' which started with the 1993 Oslo Agreement and is being revived in the Washington meeting in November. President Bush called openly for a Palestinian state in 2004 and hopes to build on this at the forthcoming conference. No one wants to talk about the actual boundaries of this state and where it will be exactly. And no one wants to discuss the fate of the 4 million Palestinian refugees waiting to return to their homeland. It is enough just to use the phrase, 'Palestinian state', like a soothing mantra that conveys an impression of political resolve and an intention to solve the problem.

Such a scenario may be superficially convincing, even comforting, for Israel and the West. It implies that Palestinians can delete the past and their own grievances, that they can be content with a small portion of their original homeland and that the refugees and other displaced people who are currently lodging in various countries will altruistically and unilaterally give up on their hopes of repatriation. It is only possible to think in this way if one entirely disregards the feelings and reactions of the people in whose midst the Jewish state was set up. This essentially colonialist and racist thinking imbued the Balfour Declaration that gave the impetus to the whole process. The idea that a foreign people could be invited into another land without the knowledge or permission of the native population would now be regarded as outrageous. But it still informs the Western approach to the Arabs in this conflict.

And under the weight of this pervasive view, many Arabs have begun to doubt themselves, to feel that their rejection of Israel is somehow unfeeling and ungracious. Reflecting this ambivalence, in 2002 the Saudis offered Israel a peace plan whereby it would withdraw from the 1967-occupied territories (as international law has long required), in return for full Arab diplomatic recognition. In other words, the Arab states were extending the hand of friendship towards Israel which it claimed that it had long sought. For the Arabs, who have been damaged in numerous ways by Israel's existence in their midst, this was a painful capitulation. It is doubtful that anyone outside the Arab world sees it in this way. Israel is regarded as legitimate and right, and Arabs are not entitled to think otherwise.

For the same reason, Palestinian resistance to Israel, whatever it does, is inadmissible. The Palestinian resistance movement first developed in the 1960s with the creation of the PLO, and later, thanks to Israeli support, through the newly formed Islamist organisations, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which were supposed to undermine

the secular PLO. But from the start Israel and its western allies vilified the PLO as an outlaw organisation, and Israel designated it 'terrorist' and persecuted its leadership. More recently, the Islamist parties have also been labelled terrorists, and now any act of defiance against Israel's occupation is treated in the same way. All peace proposals since the Oslo Agreement stipulate the cessation of Palestinian violence against Israel as a pre-condition, while not enjoining the same on Israel's use of violence against an occupied people. This in effect designates all Palestinian resistance as illegitimate, overturning decades of international law and practice. Peoples everywhere have the right to resist military or foreign occupation, except the Palestinians. Other means of resistance the Palestinians tried, whether through diplomacy or through non-violent means, have also failed.

Western support for Israel

Meanwhile, the Western powers which helped the Zionist project to succeed, have maintained their support for Israel, no matter what atrocity it commits. This support has played a crucial part in maintaining the Jewish state -- the bedrock in fact on which Israel's well-being rests. Without it, it is arguable whether all the Zionist energy that went into creating Israel would have saved the Israeli project. And this is the nub of the problem. Why does the world's most powerful state back Israel so blindly? Why does the West in general follow suit? These questions have bothered all those, Palestinians, Arabs and others, who tried to make Israel accountable for its actions and brought down to its natural regional size, only to be vitiated by the fact of this support. Edward Said's *The Question of Palestine* wrestled with this problem in 1979 and many others have since tried to do the same. No matter what explanations are put forward, it remains perplexing.

But, irrespective of the causes of this phenomenon, the inference is clear: it is Israel's backers who need tackling if the Arab-Israeli problem is to be solved. This realisation hit me hard while visiting the US in the spring of 2004. In Gaza the Israelis had just killed Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi, the second in command of Hamas; a few weeks earlier, they had killed its leader, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, against the backdrop of a massive military onslaught on the Palestinian population under Israeli occupation. As if this were all happening on another planet, I saw huge billboards in San Francisco showing pictures of pleasant, ordinary looking folk of all skin colours and ages, with the reassuring slogan, 'Israelis are people like us'. I was struck by this blatant advertising for Israel, as if it were not a foreign country but an American domestic concern. And that of course is what it has become. Such far-reaching penetration into the world's most powerful state at every level filled me with a sense of impotence, and I could see no hope for any activism which did not tackle this problem first.

But it is not only the US which is partisan towards Israel. This phenomenon is shared by most European states, and also here in Australia, although perhaps not to the same extent. Politicians, decision makers, but also ordinary people in these places need to ask themselves why they would support a state which breaks the law, which violates human rights, and which discriminates against other people.

Finding a solution

This combination of factors -- Israel's determination to take Palestine for itself, its determination to use all means to empty the land of Palestinians, and the western support it continues to receive -- is at the basis of the apparently insoluble conflict in

the Middle East today. When two parties are in conflict and the stronger one refuses to compromise, and no one is willing to pressure it to do so, there can be no solution. Only when the parameters change can this happen.

So, what is the way forward? There are only three logical possibilities: 1. Maintain the status quo 2. Implement the two-state solution, or 3. Create a unitary state for the two peoples to live together. This last, I will argue, is the only realistic, durable and just solution to this terrible conflict.

1. Doing nothing, which is what the status quo amounts to, is not a real option. Israel will try to consolidate its seizure of the West Bank, complete the wall and make it the de facto border between Israel and the Palestinians. Meanwhile, Gaza will sink into greater chaos and squalor. We can safely predict that this will be a recipe for more retaliatory violence, with Fateh and Hamas re-uniting, crushed ever more brutally by Israel, the whole leading to greater regional instability.

2. Trying to make the two-state solution happen in today's Palestinian territories is impossible if it is to conform to Palestinian and Arab requirements. These have been stated clearly many times to mean a sovereign territory encompassing the whole of the currently occupied 1967 territories, with a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem. A glance at the map of the West Bank will show clearly how impossible this vision is to realise. Currently, 46 per cent of the West Bank is under Israeli control and the rest is criss-crossed by settlements and Israelis-only bypass roads. Jerusalem has been declared Israel's 'eternal capital' and is out of bounds for Palestinians in any formal capacity. No contiguity exists between the West Bank and Gaza, and Israel intends to keep this status quo in place. If Israel does not withdraw its army and its settlements from the 1967 territories, and no one is willing to force it to do so, this will be the situation.

There is only one way to implement the two-state solution in these circumstances, and that is by way of the 'Jordanian option'. This old dream of Ariel Sharon, to make Jordan into the Palestinian state, looks more likely to be realised than at any time previously. The Palestinian enclaves left over from Israel's occupation would be united with a connection by tunnel or bridge to make them 'contiguous', and also connect them with Gaza; a token Palestinian presence would be established in Jerusalem, and the whole bunch would form the Palestinian 'state'. This 'state' would then confederate with Jordan, and the latter would become the place of extension for the West Bank, while Gaza would be linked to Egypt in a similar way.

This scenario is not fanciful, and is being actively worked on by Israel with western backing, including some Arab support. Logically, it is the only way in which Israel can be allowed to keep all its gains, while defusing Palestinian resistance and anger. But no one is thinking about the long term consequences of burying Palestinian aspirations to regaining their land, discarding Gaza as if it were a dustbin, ditching the right of return of the refugees, and ignoring the importance of Jerusalem to the Palestinians. For all these reasons, the Jordanian option if it ever happens will be a stitch-up, unstable and unlikely to last.

3. There is only one way to sort out the mess that Israel's creation caused for the Palestinian and the Arab world, and that is to return the country so far as is possible to what it had been before 1948: undivided and pluralist. The one-state solution means the creation of a single entity of Israel/Palestine in which the two peoples would live together without borders or partitions. Dividing a small country like Palestine with

resources that respect no borders, especially not artificially constructed ones, is logistically unworkable if it is to be fair. All the partition proposals to date discriminate heavily in Israel's favour. The one-state solution is unique in addressing this and all the other basic issues that have perpetuated the conflict -- land, resources, settlements, Jerusalem and refugees -- in an equitable framework. As such, it answers to the needs of common sense and justice, the sine qua non of any durable peace settlement.

In a single state, no Jewish settler would have to move and no Palestinian would be under occupation. The country's scarce resources could be shared without Israel stealing Palestinian land and water or the Palestinians left starving and thirsty. Jerusalem would be a city for both peoples, not the preserve of Israel alone against the wishes of Arabs, Muslims and Christians and to the detriment of international law. The Palestinian refugees would be allowed to return to their original homeland, if not to their actual homes. Their long exile and blighted existence would end, and the states that have played host to them could be relieved at last of a burden they have carried for nearly 60 years. The long-running sore of dispossession that has embittered generations of Palestinians and perpetuated their resistance could heal at last. With the outstanding issues thus resolved, no cause for conflict between the two sides would remain, and the Arab states could then accommodate the Israeli presence in their midst with genuine acceptance.

Such an outcome would by extension also dampen down the fires of Islamic rage against Israelis and Jews that have come to fuel violence and terrorism. The Arab hostility, real or imagined, which Israelis constantly face and which forces them to maintain their state by superior force of arms and American patronage would end. Israel, which has become the unsafest place on earth for Jews, when it becomes the new, shared state, will be a place of real refuge for them. A normal immigration policy, once the returning Palestinian refugees have been accommodated, would operate under which Jews and others who wanted to live in Palestine/Israel could do so according to fair and agreed rules.

The one-state solution is the most obvious, direct and logical route to ending an intractable conflict that has destroyed the lives of so many people and damaged the Middle East region so profoundly. I profoundly share this vision with Edward Said, something he had come to believe in towards the end of his life. People discuss the one-state solution as if it were a revolutionary idea. But it is no forward-looking innovation, rather more a way of going back, of restoring a land, deformed by half a century of division, colonisation and plunder into the whole country it had been before 1948. It is a healthy rejection of disunity in favour of unity and a humane desire for a life based on co-operation rather than confrontation. How much better for Israeli Jews to learn to live together with Palestinian Arabs in a relationship of friendship and collaboration that had the potential to be excitingly productive, rather than be condemned to the barren and dangerous dead-end future that Israel is driving them towards.