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Edward Said and Palestine

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Said's involvement with the Palestinian struggle was by his own admission more a matter of coincidence than inevitability. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he was not spurred to a life of activism by the Palestinian *nakba* ('catastrophe') of 1948; born in Jerusalem to an entrepreneurial family with ties to both Egypt and Lebanon—ties that helped it avoid the worst depredations visited upon the Palestinian people by war and dispossession—Said spent the next two decades pursuing his education in Cairo and the United States. On the eve of the 1967 June War, which he would subsequently define as an event of transformative significance, the young Said was a rising and contentedly assimilated star in the English Literature department of New York's prestigious Columbia University. Retaining only tangential connections with the Arab world (and then largely with the elite, cosmopolitan milieu of his youth beautifully memorialized in his autobiographical *Out of Place*), his promising academic career appeared to form the limit of his political horizon.

Israel's overwhelming defeat of the Arab states and occupation of the remaining areas of Palestine in 1967, the overtly triumphalist and crass anti-Arab reception accorded Israel's victory in the United States, and the rise of the Palestinian nationalist movement shortly thereafter—all against the background of an increasingly turbulent world exemplified by the Vietnam War and the gathering revolt on university campuses—had a profound effect on Said. He actively sought out the emerging Palestinian leadership in a series of visits to Jordan and Lebanon during the late 1960s, and became an increasingly visible and prolific public advocate for the Palestinian struggle for self-determination.

Relentlessly energetic, supremely eloquent, consistently rigorous and witty, always dapper in dress and appearance, Said combined unceasing moral and political commitment with an indefatigable relish for intellectual and polemical combat, and did so to unparalleled effect. By the late 1970s he had become the leading spokesperson and campaigner for Palestinian rights in the Western world, directly and indirectly responsible for an openness towards the Palestinian narrative among opinion makers, intellectuals, and activists in Europe and North America that would have been inconceivable only a decade earlier. Only PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat and a handful of other Palestinian political leaders maintained greater public recognition outside the Middle East.

Said and Palestinian politics

Said's relationship with the Palestinian leadership was complex and went through various stages. A lifelong independent with a profound distaste for the imposed discipline inherent in political organization, he never joined a political movement although he served as a member of the PLO's Palestine National Council between 1977 and 1991, and was on several occasions nominated as a negotiator on its behalf. Along with kindred spirits such as the late Ibrahim Abu-Lughod and the PLO's Lebanon representative Shafiq al-Hut, emerging leaders such as Azmi Bishara and Mustafa Bargh-

Edward W. Said played a unique role in the contemporary Palestinian national movement. It is difficult to imagine it being reproduced by another individual Palestinian, a judgement that reflects both Said's extraordinary qualities and the fundamental transformation of the environment in which he operated during the past three decades.

outhi, and international comrades like Eqbal Ahmad and Noam Chomsky, Said promoted strategies that sought to reconcile principle with pragmatism, along with tactics that would maximize their potential by achieving support in the crucial battlegrounds of European and American public opinion.

Reflecting this agenda, Said was during the 1970s a pioneering advocate of a two-state settlement and worked closely with Arafat, whom he—correctly—viewed as the only leader capable of persuading both the PLO and the international community to adopt partition as the basis for a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *The Question of Palestine* (1978), although primarily intended to expose a Western audience to the realities of Palestinian history and the legitimacy of Palestinian national aspirations, remains the most powerful statement produced on behalf of a two-state settlement to this day. It not only led to its author's vilification by Palestinian radicals, but also unleashed a concerted and increasingly vulgar campaign against his scholarship and character by pro-Israel intellectuals and activists that continues even after his death. For Arab intellectuals seeking approval in Washington's corridors of power, furthermore, shrill denunciations of Said's 'pernicious influence' became *de rigeur*. Threats against his life, emanating from both Arab and (primarily) Zionist quarters, became routine but were blithely ignored.

Although Said supported Palestinian participation in the 1991 Madrid Middle East Peace Conference, he was by then increasingly estranged from Arafat and the Tunis-based PLO leadership, and offered a blistering farewell when he resigned from the PNC that same year. According to Said, the Palestinian leadership had squandered too many opportunities, failed to mobilize Palestinian capabilities and resources, neglected the crucial struggle for global (and especially Western) public opinion, limited its energies to a largely futile search for friends in high places, institutionalized malfeasance and mediocrity, and—in the logical culmination of this collection of failures—grievously mismanaged the Palestinian response to Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

The 1993 Oslo accords ensured that the break became definitive as well as increasingly acrimonious. Said accused Arafat of a grand sell-out—signing a 'Versailles' that transformed the PLO into a 'Palestinian Vichy'—in order to perpetuate his failed leadership and the political relevance of his organization.

Oslo, he consistently argued, would provide only cosmetic changes to the occupation, and deliver a Middle Eastern version of *apartheid* rather than self-determination. The Palestinian Authority reciprocated by banning his books and attacking him on its airwaves.

As Israeli settlement expansion continued at an accelerated pace during the 1990s and his predictions about Oslo were realized, Said—no doubt inspired by the new South Africa which he had occasion to visit—concluded that a two-state settlement was no longer feasible, and could only function as a transitional phase towards a unitary, democratic state encompassing Israel and the occupied territories. Unlike most of his predecessors and

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contemporaries in this respect, his vision was however devoid of crass nationalism. He consistently advocated the need for reconciliation based on equality, whose preconditions he identified as Israeli recognition of its responsibility for the historic injustices committed against the Palestinian people, and Palestinian and Arab understanding of the legacy of Jewish suffering culminating in the Nazi holocaust. *The Politics of Dispossession* (1994), *Peace and its Discontents* (1996), and *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* (2000) collected the passionate and prolific output of commentary and advocacy produced by Said during this period, each installment additionally forming a direct and successful challenge to an increasingly debilitating disease. Given that he continued writing until his final days, a further compendium is doubtlessly in the making.

Said and the Palestinian cause

Many have commented on the cosmopolitan and consciously progressive humanism that formed the core of Said's being and politics—and the contradiction presented by his simultaneous embrace of the nationalist struggle of the Palestinians. It was an irony Said both recognized and rejected, and ultimately resolved by spirited opposition to sectarianism of any sort—most obviously the concept of an exclusivist Jewish state in the 21st century Middle East, but unhesitatingly encompassing public denunciations of growing Palestinian religious extremism and indiscriminate attacks against Israeli civilians as well. Indeed, his unrelenting assault on Israeli and US policies was consistently accompanied by withering criticism of the decrepit state of the contemporary Arab world.

As an activist for the Palestinian cause Said displayed those same traits that characterized the other aspects of his life: a level of commitment that translated into an extraordinary capacity for hard work; an insatiable determination to acquire and impart knowledge; an openness to and active sponsorship of innovative thought; selfless encouragement and promotion of new talent; and an incurable addiction to travel, people, and gossip. A zest for life, in short, that seemed to be lived beyond its known limitations. And above this all stood his sheer eloquence and capacity for representation. To many these qualities achieved their zenith in his *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (1986), an extended meditation on Palestinian identity and exile that was enhanced while being enriched by the accompanying photography of Jean Mohr.

For Palestinians who could neither reconcile themselves to the existing realities of the Oslo era, nor embrace the constricting alternatives on offer in the Palestinian and wider Arab worlds, Said and his always dependable output functioned as a moral and political compass. Yet he also had an unforgiving attitude towards criticism, which however slight never passed without response and often resulted in severed relationships. Like Arafat—who by contrast remains largely impervious to insult and condemnation—Said tended to view attacks on his work and person (attacks he needless to say also rejected on their own terms) as overt or concealed political assaults on the Palestinian cause he so visibly represented. He thus felt obliged to always give at least as good as he got, and—entering any number of simultaneous battles others would consider superfluous with unrestrained relish and zeal—typically came out ahead.

Given his extraordinary career and the breadth of his accomplishments, it is perhaps tempting to assess the Palestinian aspect of Said's life in isolation from his intellectual, scholarly, and broader cultural roles. To do so is however to neglect the organic and vital connections between these seemingly separate personas—connections that not only existed clearly in Said's own mind (see his *Representations of the*

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Intellectual, 1994), but are crucial to understanding the influence of his Palestinian activism. His pioneering role in the development of post-colonial theory, for example, both informed the manner in which he understood and advocated Palestinian self-determination, and immeasurably enhanced his ability to do so. Conversely, his experiences as an Arab at Cairo's Victoria College and later as a Palestinian in the West doubtlessly contributed to his analysis of the relationship between imperialism, scholarship, and culture—and his insistence that one must first of all unlearn essential categories such as East and West.

It would be no exaggeration to observe that national movements produce or recruit individuals of Said's calibre only once if at all; individuals of independent global standing who personify and express the justice of their cause in multiple environments with moral clarity and political consistency,

world citizens whose impact within these varied environments derives from their determination to appeal to a shared humanity and universal values—our fundamental equality as peoples and individual human beings—rather than to sympathy for a strange people in a foreign land. Although Edward W. Said's legacy will endure for many years to come, he unfortunately cannot and will not be replaced.



Edward Said with Daniel Barenboim and Saleem Abboud-Ashkar, Birzeit, January 1999.

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