

# The Poverty of Nationalism

BY EDWARD W. SAID

Immediately preceded by Benjamin Netanyahu, Yasir Arafat arrived in Washington for a meeting with Bill Clinton on January 22, the very day the President was bombarded by the Washington media about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. With the bewildered and obviously embarrassed Arafat sitting next to him quietly, Clinton fought off the press, vehemently denying allegations about having had sex with the twenty-one-year-old intern in his office.

Two days before, Netanyahu had gone directly to members of the Christian right wing, people like Jerry Falwell, who were unrestrained in their enthusiasm for Israeli territorial expansion and similarly unrestrained in their condemnation of Clinton. This clammy embrace by Netanyahu of perhaps the worst elements of the conservative movement in the United States was designed to repay Clinton for snubbing him in November. Clinton responded with customary finesse by pointedly denying the Israeli leader a lunch at the White House, a reproach Netanyahu survived handsomely by refusing any concession of territory to Palestinians beyond the 3 percent—yes, 3 percent—of the West Bank that had been given to them under the Oslo agreements.

The irony of the whole thing was poignant. Arafat had filled the Arab media before his arrival in Washington with brave declarations about how his meeting with Clinton was to be the decisive one for the future of the “peace process,” as it is euphemistically called. Like every Arab leader, Arafat refused to believe that the United States—and not simply one or another President—has historically and invidiously rejected any sign of Arab nationalism, or, in the case of the Palestinian people, any real movement towards self-determination.

The United States has been a terrible “sponsor” of the peace process. It has suc-

cumbed to Israeli pressure on everything, abandoning the principle of land for peace (no U.N. resolution says anything about returning a tiny percentage, as opposed to all of the land Israel seized in 1967), pushing the lifeless Palestinian leadership into deeper and deeper holes to suit Netanyahu’s preposterous demands.

The fact is that Palestinians are dramatically worse off than they were before the Oslo process began. Their annual income is less than half what it was in 1992; they are unable to travel from place to place; more of their land has been taken than ever before; more settlements exist; and Jerusalem is practically lost.

Still, the United States continues to subsidize Israel’s profligacy, its land-grabbing, its barbaric occupation—now thirty-one years old, the longest military occupation of the twentieth century.

And, at the same time, the United States enforces horrendously cruel sanctions and threatens bombing strikes against Iraqi civilians, hundreds of thousands of whom have died of malnutrition, lack of health care, and chronic illness due to the sanctions.

So, the scars are still unhealed, the wounds fester, the past will not be forgotten. And yet there is no overriding consensus in the Arab world as to what Israel represents, and how we should deal with it. Even using the collective pronoun “we” suggests a unity of views that is more presumed than actual.

At some higher level of politics and ideology Israel is an objective ally of some Arab policies and politicians, not all of

them rightwing Christian Lebanese. Jordan, for example, has signed a peace treaty with Israel, as have Egypt and the PLO. Still, very few Arab writers, intellectuals, academicians, artists, and even policy makers will say they are ready for normalization with Israel while it occupies Palestinian, Syrian, and Lebanese territory.

An enormous gray area exists in our collective consciousness. Israel is there, but how are we to think about it?

And, above all, how are we to act toward it? Everyone wants and speaks about peace. Yet for Palestinians—whose entire territory was captured and society destroyed—how is one to declare a statute of limitations and say, “What is past is past, let us reconcile ourselves to a future with Israel”?

When it comes to the present, how are we to say that we will coexist with a state that still has not declared its boundaries and still describes itself not as the state of its citizens (20 percent of whom are Palestinian) but as the state of the whole Jewish people entitled to the entire “land of Israel”?

As for the future, where is the glimmer of a new Israel, which is neither imperialist nor exclusivist but somehow at one with the Islamic Arab world in whose midst it has been planted as idea and as reality since 1897?

**B**y posing the challenge of Israel in this manner, a number of irreconcilable facts leap out at us. There can be no erasing the historical truth that the existence of Israel is predicated upon the obliteration of another society and people. There has been far too much sustained damage to the Palestinian people to surmount this easily. Israel, in short, exists as a political fact superimposed upon the Palestinian people, whose existence and history are denied, and whose claims have never been heard inside the discourse of Israeli life. Surely every Israeli knows this, as much as every Palestinian does. The question is how long can an intolerable situation of proximity and injury be endured

*Edward W. Said, a professor at Columbia University, is the author of "Peace and Its Discontents: Essays on Palestine" (Vintage).*