The Pumpkin and the Golden Carriage

Robert Fisk

Ladies and gentlemen, the last time I saw Edward Said I asked him to go on living. I knew of course about his leukaemia, he had often pointed out that he was receiving state-of-the-art treatment from a Jewish doctor in New York, and despite all the trash that his illness threw at him he always acknowledged the kindness and honour of his Jewish friends of whom Daniel Barenboim, of course, was amongst the finest. Edward was at the time dining at a buffet among his family in Beirut, frail but angry at Arafat’s latest surrender in Palestine/Israel and Edward answered my question like a soldier ‘I’m not going to die’, he said, ‘because so many people want me dead’.

I first met him in the early years of the Lebanese Civil War. I had heard of this man, this intellectual fighter and linguist, academic and musicologist and—God spare me for my ignorance in the 1970s—didn’t know that much about him. I was told to go to an apartment near Hamra Street in Beirut, there was shooting in the street—how easily we all came to accept shooting in Beirut then. When I climbed the steps to the apartment and heard a Beethoven Piano Sonata, it wasn’t the Moonlight—nothing so popular for Edward—but I waited outside the brown painted door for ten minutes until he had finished. ‘You’ve read my books, Robert, but I bet you haven’t read my work on music’, he once scolded me, and of course I scuttled off to the Librairie Internationale in the Gefinor building in Beirut to buy his definitive book to add to my collection: to his wonderful essays on the Palestinians, his excoriation of the corruption and viciousness of Yasser Arafat and his entourage; his outraged condemnation of the criminality of Ariel Sharon’s regime.

He was not a flawless man, was Edward; he could be arrogant with much to be arrogant about. He could be ruthless in his criticism, he could be repetitive. He could be angry to the point of irradiation, but he had much to be angry about. One afternoon I went to see him at the Beirut home of his sister, Jean (a fine lady whose own account of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Beirut Fragments, is worthy of her brother’s integrity), and he was half-lying on the sofa. ‘I am just a bit tired because of the leukaemia treatment’, he said, ‘I keep on going, I’ll not stop’. He was a tough guy, the most eloquent defender of an occupied people and the most irascible attacker of its corrupt leadership. Arafat of course, as many of you would know,
banned his books in the occupied territories, proving the immensity of Said and the intellectual impoverishment of the Palestinian Authority. At that first meeting in Beirut in the late 1970s I had asked Said about Arafat. ‘I went to a meeting held in Beirut the other day,’ Said said,

and Arafat stood there and was questioned about the future Palestinian state and all he could say was: ‘You must ask every Palestinian child this question.’ Everyone clapped. But what did he mean? What on earth was he talking about? It was rhetoric and meant nothing.

After Arafat went along with the Oslo Accords, Said was the first, rightly, to attack him. Arafat had never seen a Jewish settlement in the occupied territories, he said. There wasn’t a single Palestinian lawyer present during the Oslo negotiations. Said, of course, was immediately condemned. All of us who said that Oslo would be a catastrophic failure were ‘anti-peace’ and by vicious extension, pro-terrorist. Said would weary of the need to repeat the Palestinian story, the importance of denouncing the old lies. One of them which especially enraged him was the myth that Arab radio stations called upon the Palestinian Arabs of ’48 to abandon their homes in the new Israeli state. But he would repeat over and over again the importance of retelling the tale of Palestinian tragedy. He was abused by anonymous callers, his office was visited by a fire bomber and he was labelled many times by Jewish Americans who hated that he, a professor of literature at Columbia, could so eloquently and vigorously defend an occupied people. An attempt was made in his dying days to deprive him of his academic job by some cruel supporters of Israel who claimed the same old mendacious slur: that he was an anti-Semite. Columbia, in a long but slightly ambivalent statement, defended him. When the Jewish Head of Harvard expressed his concern about the rise of anti-Semitism in the United States, by those of course who dared to criticise Israel, Said said, scathingly: ‘A Jewish academic who’s Head of Harvard complains about anti-Semitism!’

As his health declined, Said was invited to give an EU lecture in Northern England. I can still hear the lady who organised this complaining to me that he insisted on flying business class. But why not? Was a critically ill man fighting for his life and his people not allowed some comfort across the Atlantic? His friendship with the brilliant Barenboim and their joint support for an Arab-Israeli orchestra, which of course now play regularly together, was proof of his human decency. When Barenboim was refused permission to play in Ramallah, Said rearranged his concert, much to the fury of the Sharon Government, for which Said had only contempt. The last time I saw him, he was exultant with happiness at the marriage of his son to a beautiful young woman. The time I saw him before, he’d been moved to infuriation by the failure of Palestinians in Boston to arrange his slides for a lecture on the right of return of Palestinians in the right order. Like all serious academics, he wanted accuracy. All the greater was his fury when one of his enemies claimed that he was never a true refugee from Palestine because he was in Cairo at the time of the Palestinian dispossession. He had no truck with sloppy journalism; take a look again at ‘Covering Islam’ about
the Iranian revolution, and he had even less patience with American television anchors. ‘When I went on air’, he told me once,

the Israeli consul in New York said I was a terrorist and wanted to kill him, and what did the anchor woman say to me? ‘Mr Said, why do you want to kill the Israeli consul?’

How, Said asked me, do you reply to such garbage?

Edward was a rare bird; he was both an icon and an iconoclast. He was also a rare historian. I have been tracing over some of his work for the new book that I have coming out and I have, like Edward, been digging and digging and digging into the actual events of the Palestinian disaster and what went before them in the 1930s and I think I will miss very much hearing his dogged and no doubt acerbic and very critical comments on my book. However, the Arab–Jewish struggle, from the conflicting British promises of independence for the Arab states and the support for the Jewish national home in Palestine, to the establishment of the state of Israel on Palestinian land following the Jewish Holocaust in the second world war, is an epic tragedy, whose effects have spread around the world and continue to poison the lives, not only of the participants, but of our entire Western political and military policies towards the Middle East and the Muslim lands. The narrative of events, both through Arab and Israeli eyes, and through the often biased reporting and commentaries of journalists and historians since 1948, now forms libraries of information and disinformation through which the reader may wander with incredulity and exhaustion.

As long ago as 1938, when the British still governed Palestine under a League of Nations mandate, the eminent historian George Antonius, the Edward Said of his time, was warning of the dangers of too much reliance on the vast body of literature already in existence, and his words are no less relevant today. Listen to this:

It has to be used with care, partly because of the high percentage of open or veiled propaganda and partly because the remoteness of the indispensable Arabic sources has militated against real fairness, even in the works of neutral and fair-minded historians. A similar equality eviscerates the stream of day-to-day information. Zionist propaganda is active, highly organised and widespread. The world press, at any rate, in the democracies of the West, is largely amenable to it. It commands many of the available channels for the dissemination of news and more particularly, those of the English speaking world. Arab propaganda is, in comparison, primitive and infinitely less successful. The Arabs have little of the skill, polyglotic ubiquity or financial resources which make Jewish propaganda so effective. The result is that for a score of years or so the world has been looking at Palestine mainly through Zionist spectacles and has unconsciously acquired the habit of reasoning on Zionist premises. (Antonius, 1969, p. 387)

Those of you who had to listen to the Palestinian Authority’s spokesmen would agree with me that not much has changed.
Most of the last thirty years of my life has been spent cataloguing events that relate directly or indirectly to the battle for Palestine, to the unresolved injustices that have afflicted both Arabs and Jews since the 1920s and earlier. British support for an independent Arab nation was expressed, of course, when Britain needed Arab forces to fight the Turks. The Balfour Declaration giving support to a Jewish national home was made when Britain needed Jewish support both politically and scientifically during the First World War. Lloyd George, who was British Prime Minister in 1917, would often fantasise upon the biblical drama being played out in Palestine. He said that he wanted Jerusalem for Christmas in 1917. He got it, of course, courtesy of General Allenby, and referred in his memoirs to the capture, by British troops, of the most famous city in the world which had for centuries baffled the efforts of Christendom to regain possession of its sacred shrines. That Lloyd George should have reflected upon Allenby’s campaign as a successor to the crusades, ‘to regain possession of its [Jerusalem’s] sacred shrines’, was a theme that would run throughout the twentieth century in the West’s dealings with the Middle East (Lloyd George, 1936, p. 1092). It would find its natural echo in George W. Bush’s talk of a crusade in the immediate aftermath of the international crimes against humanity of September 11, 2001.

In those same memoirs, Lloyd George makes scarcely any reference to the Balfour Declaration and then only to suggest that it was a gesture made, of course, to reward the prominent Zionist Chaim Weizmann for his scientific work on acetone, a chemical essential in the making of cordite and therefore to the British war effort. Weizmann’s name, Lloyd George would enthuse, will rank with that of Nehemiah in the fascinating and inspiring story of the children of Israel. Nehemiah was responsible for the fifth century BC rebuilding and restoration of Jerusalem. But at almost the same time Lloyd George was writing this, in 1936, he was speaking far more frankly about the Balfour Declaration directly in the House of Commons. Here is what he said during a debate on the Arab revolt:

It was at one of the darkest periods of the war that Mr Balfour first prepared his Declaration. At that time, the French army had mutinied; the Italian army was on the eve of collapse; America had hardly started preparing in earnest. There was nothing left but Britain confronting the most powerful military combination that the world had ever seen. [That was the German Empire and the Ottoman, of course, Empire, which we were going to destroy—intended to—and the Austrian Hungarian Empire.] It was important for us, Lloyd George said, to seek every legitimate help that we could get. The Government came to the conclusion, from information received from every part of the world, that it was very vital that we should have the sympathies of the Jewish community. We certainly had no prejudices against the Arabs because at that moment we had hundreds of thousands of troops fighting for Arab emancipation from the Turk. Under these conditions and with the advice they received, the Government decided that it was desirable for us to secure the sympathy and co-operation of that most remarkable community, the Jews, throughout the world. They were helpful to us in America to a very large extent; and they were helpful even in Russia at that moment because Russia was just about to walk out and leave us alone. Under those conditions we proposed this to
our allies. France, Italy, and the United States accepted it. The Jews with all the influence that they possessed, responded nobly to the appeal that was made. (The Times, 20 June 1936, quoting Lloyd George in the House of Commons, 19 June 1936)

The French army’s mutiny and the potential collapse on the Italian front it seems had more to do with promises for a Jewish national home than did Nehemiah. But now the Arabs were demanding, practically, that there should be no more Jewish immigration, Lloyd George complained to the Commons. We could not accept that without dishonouring our obligations. It was not as if the Arabs were in a position to say that Jewish immigration was driving them, the ancient inhabitants, out. But Lloyd George grasped, if with too little gravity, where the problem lay:

The obligations of the Mandate were specific and definite. They were that we were to encourage the establishment of a National home for the Jews in Palestine without detriment to any of the rights of the Arab population. That was a dual undertaking and we must see that both parts of the Mandate are enforced. (The Times, 20 June 1936, quoting Lloyd George in the House of Commons, 19 June 1936)

But of course, both parts of the British mandate of Palestine could not be enforced and Nazi Germany’s persecution of its Jews in 1936, which Lloyd George specifically mentioned, would turn into the Holocaust, would ensure the existence of an Israeli state in Palestine whatever the rights of the Arab population. By 1938 George Antonius was saying quite clearly that

the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine or of a national home based on territorial sovereignty cannot be accomplished without forcibly displacing the Arabs.

Antonius wanted an independent Arab state in which as many Jews as the country could hold without prejudice to its political and economic freedom would live in peace, security and dignity and enjoy full rights of citizenship. Fearing what he called an unpredictable holocaust of Arab, Jewish and British lives, help for the Jews of Europe, he said, must be sought elsewhere than in Palestine. I quote Antonius again and, remember, this was in 1938:

The treatment meted out to Jews in Germany and other European countries is a disgrace to its authors and to modern civilisation; but posterity will not exonerate any country that fails to bear its proper share of the sacrifices needed to alleviate Jewish suffering and distress. To place the brunt of the burden upon Arab Palestine is a miserable evasion of the duty that lies upon the whole of the civilised world. It is also morally outrageous. No code of morals can justify the persecution of one person in an attempt to relieve the persecution of another. The cure for the eviction of Jews from Germany is not to be sought in the eviction of the Arabs from their homeland; and the relief of Jewish distress may not be accomplished at the cost of
inflicting a corresponding distress upon an innocent and peaceful population. 
(Antonius, 1969, pp. 410–11)

It is astonishing that such remarks, so prescient in view of the Palestinian disaster a
decade later, should have been written in 1938. Yet there were others who foresaw
future disaster and future history, in equally bleak terms. Few people remember or
have come across this quotation from Winston Churchill in 1937. Reflecting upon the
future, Churchill had written of the impossibility of a partitioned Palestine and had
far more prophetically talked of how

the wealthy, crowded, progressive Jewish State lies in the plains and on the sea
coasts (of Palestine). Around it, in the hills and the uplands, stretching far and wide
into the illimitable deserts, the war-like Arabs of Syria, of Transjordania, of Arabia,
backed by the armed forces of Iraq, offer the ceaseless menace of war . . . To
maintain itself, the Jewish State must be armed to the teeth, and must bring in
every able-bodied man to strengthen its army. But how long would this process be
allowed to continue by the great Arab populations in Iraq and Palestine? Can it be
expected that the Arabs would stand by impassively and watch the building up with
Jewish world capital and resources of a Jewish army equipped with the most deadly
weapons of war, until it was strong enough not to be afraid of them? And if ever the
Jewish army reached that point, who can be sure that, cramped within their narrow
limits, they would not plunge out into the new undeveloped lands that lie around
them?

‘If Palestine should be partitioned’, Churchill concluded,

I find it difficult . . . to resist the conclusion that the . . . [partition] scheme would
lead inevitably to the complete evacuation of Palestine by Great Britain. (Churchill,
1947)

And so, as they say, it came to pass.

John Bagot Glubb, commanding the Arab legion in 1939, would comment
movingly that

the Jewish tragedy owed its origin to the Christian nations of Europe and America.
At last the conscience of Christendom was awake. The age-long Jewish tragedy must
cease. But when it came to the payment of compensation in expiation of their past
shortcomings, the Christian nations of Europe and America decided that the bill
should be paid by a Muslim nation in Asia. (Glubb, 1976, p. 231)

In 1997, a Palestinian humanitarian group in Scotland decided to mark the fiftieth
anniversary of the UN Partition Resolution, the end of the British Mandate, the
Israeli war of independence and the Palestinian Nakba by publishing a day-by-day
account of events in Palestine throughout 1948.

Largely drawn from the pages of the then-distinguished British newspaper, The
Scotsman, it was a project that sometimes yielded devastating results. Here, for
example, is a despatch from ‘special correspondent recently returned from the Middle East’ which appeared in *The Scotsman* on 13 September 1948:

A new danger to law and order is emerging in the Middle East. It comes from a loosely formed association of Arab terrorist gangs of hot-headed, xenophobic young men who have sworn to rid their countries of all Westerners and of course particularly of British and Americans. Open threats have been already made to Europeans living in Damascus, Baghdad and Cairo—oil men mostly—that if they continue to have business relations with the Jews they will be killed. . . . The backbone of this new terrorist organisation is provided by young Palestinian Arabs. They have seen their country overrun. . . . and have lost everything they possessed—homes, property, money, jobs; they have nothing further to lose. They feel they have been let down by the British and the Americans, by the United Nations; and also, to some extent, by the other Arab countries. They now realise there is a grave danger that the present situation in Palestine, with the Jews in total possession of the best part of the country, will be generally recognised and legalised.

Another disturbing light into the future was cast in an article by Patrick O’Donovan which had appeared in *The Scotsman* on 14 July 1948.

The war began as a simple war of survival—or so it seemed to the Jews. There was a set of figures that every little sunburnt child knew by heart ‘700,000 Jews against 30 million Arabs plus the support of Britain’. It seemed a victory every time a Jewish settlement survived an attack. . . . but the Arabs proved less effective. And the Jewish consent to the continuation of the truce was flouted. (It makes no difference that the consent was certainly given in the knowledge that the Arabs would first refuse.) The Jews have been freed from any obligation to hold their hand. If Count Bernadotte’s efforts fail, then the Jews will wage a war which frankly will aim at acquiring a maximum of Arab land, much of which will be retained because it will be empty of Arabs and occupied by Jews. . . . In Haifa. . . . they have opened a ghetto for the Arabs. Four of the meaner streets have been wired off and, just like the Jews in Medieval Cracow, Christian and Muslim Arabs must sleep and live here under guard. Business men can apply for passes if they wish to emerge during the day. . . . it would be hard to visualise a more subdued and frightened population than the Arabs left in Israel.

Although the extent of Palestinian dispossession often appears to be a newly-discovered fact of Middle East history, at least until new historians like Benny Morris researched the Israeli government archives of the time, the British press reported the Nakba in graphic detail. On 25 October, for instance, *The Times* of London reported from Beersheba that

the Arab villages are deserted, their miserable houses have been looted, and many are burnt. The inhabitants, estimated to be about 20,000—a number which has been swollen considerably by refugees from the north—have fled and no-one knows, or apparently cares, where they have gone. It is obvious that most have fled in panic, leaving behind their cloaks, sheepskins, and blankets so necessary if they are to survive the cold nights of the Hebron hills. . . . in Beersheba itself, once a thriving centre for camel trading, a few inhabitants remain, and at present members
of the Israeli Army are systemically looting those houses which survived the bombing. It is perhaps an ancient and tacitly accepted rule of war that troops should make themselves comfortable at the expense of the vanquished, but it is difficult to excuse the behaviour of some, who ridicule Islamic devotions in a desecrated mosque ... holy books have been torn and strewn upon the floor ... Such a scene is disappointing to those who had gratefully observed the care taken by the Israeli Army to guarantee the sanctity of Christian holy places elsewhere, and by those correspondents who today visited the Imperial war cemetery just outside the town. In spite of the difficulties under which they worked, the Arab caretakers to the last obviously attended the graves of the British and Australian soldiers who died here in 1917, and English flowers are still blooming in desert sands.

Desecration and murder were not tools of one side in this war. Of course, when the Israelis captured east Jerusalem in 1967 they discovered that Jordanian troops had used Jewish gravestones for lavatory floors. Ambushes and killings cut down many Jewish civilians although Israel’s advance into the Arab villages of Galilee was accompanied, as contemporary research in Israel has proved, by massacres and sometimes the rape of young women. But if Israeli historians have proved the truth of this, Arab historians have largely remained silent about their own side’s iniquities in this and other wars. In my own book on the Lebanon war, I have written at great length about the Palestinian dispossession of 1948, the subsequent history of those Palestinian homes that were vacated by their fearful inhabitants and the fate of the 750,000 Palestinian refugees and their millions of descendants today—many of whom rot in the squalor of camps in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and in the occupied West Bank. Following their travail, the task of reporting their hopeless political leadership, their victimisation, most cruelly demonstrated when they were turned into the ‘aggressors’ by an all powerful Israel and later an even more hegemonic United States—and their pathetic, brave and often callous attempts to seek the world’s sympathy—have been one of the most depressing experiences in journalism.

The more we wrote about the Palestinian dispossession, the less effect it seemed to have and the more we were abused as journalists. For throughout these long years there was one outstanding, virtually unchanging phenomenon which ensured that the Middle East balance of power remained unchanged: America’s unwavering, largely uncritical, often involuntary support for Israel. Israel’s security, or supposed lack thereof, became the yardstick for all negotiations, all military threats and all wars. The injustice done to the Palestinians, the dispossession, the massacres, not only the loss of that part of Palestine which became Israel—and is internationally recognised as such—but also the occupation of the remainder of the mandate territory and the bloody suppression of any and all manifestations of Palestinian resistance; all this had to take second place to Israel’s security and the civilised values and democracy for which Israel was widely promoted. Her army, which often behaved with cruelty and indiscipline, was to be regarded as an exemplar of purity of arms and those of us who witnessed Israel’s killing of civilians were to be abused as liars, anti-Semites or, of course, ‘friends of terrorism’. Report the wanton use of violence by Palestinians,
aircraft hijackings, attacks on illegal Jewish settlements and then inevitably suicide bombings on the innocent—the executioner with explosives strapped to his or her body—and that was terror, pure and simple, dangerously present but comfortably isolated from reason, cause or history. As long as Palestinians were accused of crimes that had been committed because they hated Israel or hated Jews or were brought up as anti-Semites, despite being Semites themselves, or paid to carry out terror or because they hated democracy or represented evil—most of these explanations would later be adopted by the Americans about their Arab enemies—then Palestinians were outside the boundaries of reason; they were generically violent, they couldn’t be talked to, they could not be negotiated with. You cannot negotiate with terrorists.

Terrorism is a word that has become a plague on our vocabulary: the excuse and reason and moral permit for State sponsored violence, our violence which is now used on the innocent of the Middle East evermore outrageously and promiscuously. Terrorism, Terrorism, Terrorism has become a full stop, a punctuation mark, a phrase, a speech, a sermon, the be-all and end-all of everything that we must hate in order to ignore injustice and occupation and killing on a large scale. Terror, Terror, Terror, Terror, Terror. It is a sonata, a symphony, an orchestra tuned to every television and radio station and news agency report, the soap opera of the devil served up on prime time or distilled in wearingly dull and mendacious form by the right wing commentators of the American east coast and, I am sorry to say, by many of my American colleagues, also by some of the intellectuals of Europe. Strike against terror, victory over terror, war on terror, everlasting war on terror.

Rarely in history have soldiers and journalists and presidents and kings aligned themselves in such thoughtless and questioning ranks. In August 1914, the soldiers of Britain, France and Germany thought they would be home by Christmas; today we are told we are fighting forever. The war is eternal; the enemy is eternal, his face changing on our screens. Once he lived in Cairo and sported a moustache and nationalised the Suez Canal. Then he lived in Tripoli and wore a ridiculous military uniform and helped the IRA and bombed American bars in Berlin. Then he wore a Muslim imami’s gown and ate yoghurt in Tehran and planned Islamic revolution. Then he wore a white gown and lived in a cave in Afghanistan. And then he wore another silly moustache and resided in a series of palaces around Baghdad. Terror, Terror, Terror. Finally he wore a Kuffia head-dress and outdated, Soviet style military fatigues, his name was Yasser Arafat and he was the master of world terror. And then he was a super statesman and went to the White House and then again he became a master of terror linked by his Israeli enemies to the terror maestro of them all: the one who lived in the Afghan cave.

Arafat’s greatest error, his support for Saddam [Hussein], was to give him his greatest and most hollow victory. Financially cut off by the wealthiest gulf Arab states, especially Kuwait itself of course, and derided by the world, Arafat shared the fate of King Hussein of Jordan, who also supported Saddam. He was now weak enough to be accepted as a peace partner of Israel. The Palestinians were not at first allowed to represent themselves—remember President George Bush senior’s Middle East peace
was to permit the Palestinians to attend the Madrid Middle East conference only as part of a Jordanian delegation; a delegation, moreover, in which Arafat was very definitely not invited to participate and the Israelis would have a veto over those who attended.

In his theatrically arranged Kuffia head-dress, his khaki uniform and his silly pistol, Arafat was now a strangely dated figure, a revolutionary from the past who would soon have to put aside childish things. Even the word revolutionary sounded odd. Arafat’s revolution was now over; for the half million Palestinian refugees in Lebanon who could now never return to their 1948 homes in what is now Israel; for the final settlement of Oslo was scarcely going to allow them to return to Haifa, Natanya and Galilee, it was a betrayal. ‘I could accept’, an Israeli soldier told me as he was helping to impose another curfew on Hebron in early September of 1993, ‘that compared to the others Arafat wasn’t a bad terrorist’ . What a reflection on the revolutionary life of Yasser Arafat. Revolutionaries are supposed to be intellectuals, Robespierre, Lenin, Marx, Trotsky, Atatürk, Nasser, Castro, Guevara. They wrote books or talked philosophy amid their struggles; not so Arafat. He could rarely be seen reading books, let alone writing them. What he had however, was single mindedness, something to which Edward Said always paid attention and paid tribute. There was a certain self-regard in this and a lot of arrogance but it was a great strength. From start to finish it was Palestine, Palestine, Palestine. For the Palestinian poor of course, Arafat’s uniform and head-dress—fancy dress to us Westerners and to the Israelis—were necessary, part of the binding of the spirits amid exile, but those spirits were now to be abandoned.

A new rationale had been laid out in the Middle East, one which on a far greater geopolitical as well as geographical scale continues to this day. It goes like this: America is running a peace process; anyone supporting it is a friend, that includes Israel and for the time being it included Arafat as well unless he was forced to metamorphose—which he was—back into being a super-terrorist. It also included Egypt and Jordan and Saudi Arabia, our friends in the Middle East. But any Arab who believed that the Arafat–Rabin agreement was flawed or who believes today that Washington’s monumentally ambitious and hopeless plans for Iraq and the entire Middle East are based upon lies or deceit, anyone who opposed this policy, objected to it, disagreed with it, however non-violently, or said anything that might damage it, was treated as an enemy or, more specifically in the words of the US press, an ‘enemy of peace’. Thus, by extension, anyone opposing America’s policy in the region, which also means opposing Israel, is an ‘enemy of peace’. The all-embracing phrase leads to grotesque distortion. When Palestinian protesters demonstrated against the Israeli dynamiting and rocketing of seventeen houses in the Tofa district of Gaza in 1993, for example, CNN showed a tape of one of the young men stoning Israeli troops. I remember this because I was filming the same scene with a film crew for Channel 4 in Britain. But CNN’s commentary described the young men as protesting at the peace process. You see, if he was fighting Israel, the Palestinian must be an enemy of peace; even if that had been his cause of complaint rather than the house-dynamiting, it was
clearly regarded as illegitimate; yet it was the PLO–Israeli Oslo agreement that in many Palestinian eyes permitted Israel to keep both troops and settlements in the West Bank. It was Arafat, for tens of thousands of his detractors, who legitimised the Jewish settlements because American newspapers and television networks also did not want to be regarded as enemies of peace.

Many in the West still did not realise just how disastrously Arafat’s peace accord with Israel was disintegrating. Under the Oslo agreement, you may remember, the occupied West Bank would be divided into three zones. Don’t go to sleep because I was tempted to when I had to read the Oslo agreement about ten times! Zone A would come under exclusive Palestinian control. Zone B, under Israeli military occupation in participation with the Palestinian authority, and Zone C, under total Israeli occupation. In the West Bank Zone A comprised only 1.1 per cent of the land. Whereas in Gaza, overpopulated and now abandoned by Israel, almost all the territory was to come under Arafat’s control. He, after all, was to be the policeman of Gaza. Zone C in the West Bank comprised 60 per cent of the land, which allowed Israel to continue the rapid expansion of settlements for Jews and Jews only on Arab land. Arafat, as Edward Said was the first to point out, had already conceded Jerusalem. He had already agreed that it would be discussed only during final status talks. It thus fell outside the zoning system remaining entirely in Israeli hands.

The truth was that Oslo, far from holding out the possibility of statehood for the Palestinians, allowed Israel to renegotiate UN security council resolution 242. Whereas 242 demanded a withdrawal of Israeli forces from territory captured during the 1967 war, Oslo permitted the Israelis to decide from which bits of the remaining 22 per cent of Palestine they would withdraw. The zoning system represented this new Israeli reality. The Israelis had the maps; Oslo, incredibly, was negotiated without proper maps on the Palestinian side and the Israelis decided which zones would be given to the Palestinians as a gift, you see, at once and, which would be haggled over later.

Indeed a detailed investigation in 2000 of Israeli withdrawals under the articles of agreement would prove that not a single one of these accords had been honoured by the Israelis since the 1991 Madrid conference.1 I’ll just, because we need to get the record straight, tell you what happened. The Oslo 2 Taba agreement, concluded by Rabin in September 1995, two months before he was assassinated, promised three Israeli withdrawals from Zones A, B and C, these to be completed by October 1997. Final status agreements—on Jerusalem, refugees, water, settlements—would have to be completed by October 1999 by which time the occupation was supposed to have ended. In January 1997 however a handful of Jewish settlers were granted 20 per cent of Hebron despite Israel’s obligation under Oslo to leave all West Bank towns. By October 1998, a year later, Israel had not carried out the Taba accords. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu negotiated a new agreement at Wye-River dividing the second redeployment promised at Taba into two phases, but he honoured only the first of them. You can see how journalists get tired of this stuff; I mean the New York Times is not going to worry. Netanyahu had promised to reduce the percentage of
West Bank land under exclusively Israeli occupation from 72 per cent to 59 per cent, transferring 41 per cent of the West Bank to Zones A and B. But at Sharam El Sheik in 1999, Ehud Barak, the new Israeli prime minister, reneged on this agreement, made at Wye-River, fragmenting Netanyahu’s two phases into three, the first of which would transfer 7 per cent from Zone C to Zone B. All implementations of the agreements stopped there.

You can’t really expect many journalists to go through this but if you work it out you see what was happening. In the meantime the number of settlers illegally living on Palestinian land had risen in the seven years since Oslo from 80,000 to 150,000— even though the Israelis as well as the Palestinians were forbidden to take unilateral steps under the terms of the agreement. The Palestinians saw this, not without reason, as proof of bad faith. Little wonder that by 1999 Edward Said, who had for many years shown both compassion and understanding for Arafat’s brave role as the sole representative of a forgotten and dispossessed people, felt able to describe the Palestinian leader not only as a tragic figure but as the Petain of the Palestinians.

The moment the Oslo Accord was revealed, the Israeli Likud Party foresaw the end of Jewish colonies on Palestinian land. Netanyahu claimed that these Israeli islands isolated in the PLO Sea would not last long. He need not have worried. On 27 September 1994, when one hundred and forty Jewish colonies already existed in the West Bank but when the Oslo agreement was only a year old, the Israeli prime minister, Rabin, approved the construction of an extra one thousand apartments at the settlement of Alfei Menash close to Jerusalem. By 1996, 86.5 per cent of east Jerusalem had been removed from Palestinian residents’ control and use [and] 34 per cent of east Jerusalem was expropriated for the building of Jewish colonies. The Jerusalem municipality announced plans to build another 70,000 new housing units over the next ten years. Then came the opening of the archaeological tunnel from the Wailing Wall which ran beneath Muslim east Jerusalem. Violent protests against the opening of the tunnel, which was paid for by the Israeli ministry of religious affairs, left 43 Palestinians and 11 Israeli soldiers dead.

We know, of course, the history of the rest of this illegal colonial expansion which continued throughout the Oslo peace process with sometimes active encouragement from within the United States. On 18 April 1997, the New York Times actually carried a full page advertisement signed by ten Christian spiritual leaders, including Pat Robertson and Gerry Fallwell and others, all supporting the continued sovereignty of the state of Israel over the holy city of Jerusalem. ‘We believe that Jerusalem or any portion of it shall not be negotiable in any peace process.’ What did Arafat think when he read this? He didn’t read it, did he? ‘Jerusalem must remain undivided as the eternal capital of the Jewish people.’ This ‘spiritual message’, as it was called, claimed that Israel had demonstrated sensitivities to the concerns and needs of all Jerusalem residents including the Palestinians, and Israel’s right to Jerusalem as a sovereign capital came by divine mandate. In due course, as we know, Sharon himself abandoned the settlements in the dustbin of Gaza but went on building as he does today in the West Bank.
What does this really mean, the dispossession of the Palestinians and the construction of settlements for Jews and Jews only on Arab land? In 1993 I made a series of films called *From Beirut to Bosnia* which were intended to ask and to explain why many Muslims in the region of the Middle East were coming to hate and despise the West. Our second film was about the Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank and in one sequence we found a man, a Palestinian living on a little bit of land in East Jerusalem, who was trying to hold onto his land but had been given an order to quit and get out because there was going to be an Israeli settlement, part of the Ma`ale Adomim settlement which is now the focus of attention by both the Americans and Israelis. I would like to show you this short sequence in order to demonstrate to those of you who haven’t been to Palestine-Israel what it looks like when the bulldozers arrive.

*[Movie starts]*

*Narrator voice, Robert Fisk:* Jerusalem, holy to Jews, Muslims and Christians has been illegally annexed by Israel which still claims it to be its eternal and unified capital. East of the city, outside the internationally recognised border of Israel, only a little bit of the old rural Palestine remains and the huge Jewish settlements built on Palestinian land are now cities. A ring of Israeli concrete around Jerusalem. It takes a brave Palestinian to hold out here, to cling onto his own land in the face of Israel’s expanding settlements. But in this little patch of orchard is a family that has refused to leave its land, despite an order to get out.

*[Bulldozer noise]*

*Robert Fisk (RF):* What is happening Sulieman?

*Sulieman Khateeb (SK):* As you see they are taking the land here.

*RF:* But, when you see this what future is there for you? This land is gone. How can you possibly hope to keep your land in the face of this?

*SK:* Because we are still in the land, we have our house in the land covered with trees, with walls, it is a 'live' land.

*RF:* It is a living land.

*SK:* It is a living land of course.

*Narrator:* Mohamed Khateeb and his son had been told to leave their home to make way for a settlement for Jews, some of them from as far away as Russia.

*[Bulldozer noise]*

*RF:* Sulieman how long has your family owned this land here?

*SK:* We own it as long as we live. It is inherited from our grandfathers and fathers as well.

*RF:* How many years do you think that is, more than a hundred years?

*SK:* Yes.

*RF:* Do you have the documents to prove this? Do you have the original deeds and papers proving . . .

*SK:* Of course we have, we have documents from the Ottoman period and from the period of the British mandate also.

*RF:* And you have your tax forms and you have your documents showing that this bit of land that we are on now.

*SK:* Yes, all of this, yes.

*[Pointing to Mohamed Khateeb, MK]* *RF:* Why is he fighting for his land? Ask him would you?

*SK:* Because it is his house.
[Interrupting] RF: Would you ask him?
SK [speaking in Arabic, translation]: Why are you fighting to keep the house?
MK [speaking in Arabic, translation]: Of course I will fight as much as I can. I will not let the house go at all [to be lost], our souls will go before our house will go. It is my property, the property of my father, my grandfather and great grandfather. What do you expect?
Um Sulieman [mother of Sulieman speaking in Arabic, translation]: It is not enough [referring to surviving on the land], we cannot eat, drink or sleep. We fall ill due to all this trouble. Despite all this, are we expected to leave our home? Where would we go? Are we expected to go and live in other people's homes? He [her husband] is sick and needs support and we both are elderly and sick. Is not this oppression?
RF: Sulieman, what is this document we have here?
SK: A warning for us to leave the house.
RF: This is the official notice to quit.
SK: Yes.
RF: This is in Hebrew. Do you speak Hebrew?
SK: No, not very much.
RF: What have you done with this document? Where is the original?
SK: Ah, we gave it to our lawyer Jonathan Kuttab.
RF: Kuttab.
SK: Yes.
RF: And he is in East Jerusalem.
SK: East Jerusalem.
Narrator: Although annexed by Israel the centre of east Jerusalem is still ostentatiously Arab. Israelis fear they will be attacked here. Israeli taxi-men don’t like to drive on this side of the city.
[Arabic music]
RF [reading a sign on the wall]: Palestinian centre for the study of violence, [laughing] that sounds promising. Jonathan Kuttab, there is our man.
Jonathan Kuttab (JK): He was given a charge sheet saying that he has to turn over his property to the state. But you see it was needed for a public purpose.
RF: Public purpose, meaning?
JK: Hospitals, schools, roads, something that benefits the community. So we were told the public purpose was a special scheme for building your own home. I said wonderful. He has been trying very hard to build a home for his son on this land [getting permission to build] and was told you could not build on it. So if now he can build on it he will be glad to build a unit, a single apartment here in return for turning over his property. He does not want money, but he wants to participate in this wonderful public scheme.
RF: And?
JK: Well, he was told, ‘I’m afraid you are not a member of the public we intend to serve. Because the only people who are entitled under this program are either new immigrants or those who have served in the army’.
RF: But he cannot serve in the army.
JK: He said ‘our army’; it has to be the Israeli army. If the purpose for which this confiscation occurred is to serve Jews and Jews only and excludes him, we object... .
Narrator: Mikey Molad is head of the settlements resident’s association.
Mikey Molad (MM): Arabs and Jews and..., here I’ll let you understand a little bit about the geography. Over here where the minaret is, the mosque, is a village outside of Jerusalem.

RF: And obviously is an Arab Muslim village.

MM: It is an Arab Muslim village called Hismeh, in front of us you see a build-your-own-house scheme, where on the right of it we see an Arab house and he is or was owner of part of the land and he wanted to buy.

Narrator: Mr Molad has been following the story of Mohamed Khateeb and the Palestinian’s efforts to keep his land.

MM: ... So he went to court.

RF: Because ...

MM: Because (he said) this is part of my land and I’m willing for it again but I want the right to buy on it and its in court and we will wait and see ...

RF [interrupting]: Why won’t you let him?

MM: Because he is an Arab not Jewish.

RF: Do you think it is fair it is still in the courts. Shouldn’t the Israelis just say ‘fine this man wants to be with us!’

MM: If you talk fairness maybe you are right but we live in a society that is governed by certain laws and if I would have been him I won’t even try to go and live within dense Jewish settlements it won’t fit and there will be problems.

[End of movie, Robert Fisk speaks to the audience]

I have to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that when that series of films was shown on the Discovery Channel in America after the first showing, twice on each side of the United States, Israeli lobby groups attacked it saying it was anti-Semitic and there were no further showings in either Britain or America. We had hoped, of course, that Mohamed Khateeb might be able to keep his home with the publicity that we tried to generate. Discovery is a well-watched channel around the world particularly in the United States. He was thrown out of his home and with his old, elderly wife went to live in that village called Hismeh which as Mikey Molad, the leader of the settlements committee pointed out, is outside Jerusalem. Another family gone.

The pumpkin, you see, of the Oslo agreement could never be turned into the golden carriage of peace. But it took the collapse of the Arafat–Barak talks at Camp David in 2000 to prove this true. Even then Clinton was reduced to claiming that the Oslo negotiations were based on UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 which is not what Oslo said at all. And even Arafat must have realised that the end had come when Madeleine Albright made her preposterous offer of ‘a sense of sovereignty over Muslim religious sites in Jerusalem’. Only the silly villages that Arafat might have controlled outside his would-be capital would have virtually full sovereignty according to the Americans. There then followed the wilfully misleading leaks to the effect that Arafat had turned down 95 per cent of Palestine. In reality around 64 per cent of the 22 per cent of Palestine was left to him. Barak would not give up Jerusalem or abandon the settlements. Arafat would not make the concession of ceding Israeli control over all of Jerusalem. So the sons of Abraham acknowledged what so many Israelis and Palestinians knew all along: that Oslo didn’t work.
Clinton predictably saw fit to praise the stronger of the two parties, spoke of Barak’s courage and vision, but merely of Arafat’s commitment. So much for America’s role as honest broker of the Middle East peace. Offered virtual sovereignty to secure virtual peace, the Palestinian leadership, corrupt in defeat and undemocratic, preferred failure to humiliation, at last. But is ‘Palestinian’ now just a dirty word, or is ‘Arab’ the dirty word? Let’s start again with Edward Said who wrote among many other books, *Orientalism*, the ground-breaking work which first explored our imperial Western fantasies about the Middle East. After he died of leukaemia, Zev Chafets sneered at Said in the *New York Daily News* in the following extraordinary words.

As an Episcopalian, Said is ineligible for the customary seventy two virgins, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he is honoured with a couple of female doctoral graduates.

According to Chafets, *Orientalism*, Said’s book, rests on a simple thesis: Westerners are inherently unable to fairly judge or even grasp the Arab world. Said, he said, didn’t blow up the marines in Lebanon in 1983, he certainly didn’t fly a plane into the World Trade Centre; what he did was to jam America’s ‘intellectual radar’. When I read this vicious obituary I recalled hearing Chafets’ name before—so I turned to my Beirut files and up he popped in 1982 as former director of the Israeli government press office in Jerusalem. He had just published then a book falsely claiming that Western journalists in Beirut, myself among them of course, had been terrorised by bands of thugs, and alleging in the words of one US journalism magazine, that, the American press is ‘engaged in a conspiracy to defame Israel’. So I got the point. You can kick a scholar when he is dead if he is a Palestinian and kick a journalist when he is dead if you want to claim he was murdered by Palestinians. Sean Toolan, according to Chafets, an Irish journalist who was murdered in Beirut, was killed because of what he wrote about the PLO. Actually Toolan was killed by a man whose wife he was having an affair with. But nonetheless, journalists and scholars are basically of the same chain of being at the moment.

And now, as you know, the same sick fantasies have been taking hold in Australia where a determined effort was made by Israel’s supposed friends to prevent Palestinian scholar, Hanan Ashrawi of all people, from receiving the 2003 Sydney Peace prize. As you also know, a Jewish writer in Sydney bravely defended her, not least because a local Israeli lobby appeared to have deliberately misquoted an interview she gave to me more than two years ago, distorting her words to imply—which she didn’t—that she was in favour of suicide bombing. Ashrawi is not in favour of these wicked attacks. She has fearlessly spoken against them. She has said that she is willing to devote her life to peace and justice with Israelis and Jews but, just as she was abused when she spoke at Colorado University in 2002, so she was smeared here in Australia by local lobbyists. Sydney University of course had already withdrawn the use of its great hall for the presentation of the Peace Prize and the Lord Mayor of Sydney, Lucy Turnbull, had dissociated the city of Sydney as sponsor of the prize for the presentation. How much longer must this go on? Ashrawi, I
noticed, was now being called by Mark Steyn in, of all places, The Irish Times, an ‘ageing bespoke of apologist of terror’. As a recipient of a comparatively modest bunch of hate mail each week—and to two American readers I repeat, no, my mother was not Eichmann’s daughter; she was in the RAF in 1940—I am beginning to think this intimidation and filth is getting very nasty indeed.

And it is getting worse. Said’s work, as many of you may know, was denounced in testimony to the US Congress by Dr Stanley Kurtz who claimed that the presence of post-colonial history in academic circles had produced professors who refuse to support or instruct students interested in joining the state department or American intelligence services. So now the House was proposing to set up an oversight board in the United States with appointed members from Homeland Security, the Department of Defence and the US National Security Agency that will link university department funding on Middle East studies to students training for careers in national security, defence and intelligence agencies. I have a feeling Orientalism won’t be on the book list. As Professor Michael Bedner of the History Department of the University of Texas at Austin said:

The possibility that someone in US Homeland Security would instruct college professors on the proper patriotic American-friendly textbooks that may be used in class scares and outrages me.

So is it goodbye to the life work of Said and goodbye to peace prizes for Hanan Ashrawi? Goodbye to Palestinians in fact? Then the radar really will be jammed. So my last words to you tonight: Watch out. Thank you very much ladies and gentlemen.

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Note


References