

EDWARD SAID

A PEOPLE

IN NEED OF LEADERSHIP

ISRAELI PRESSURE on Palestinians was stepped up even further in the days following the dreadful events of September 11th. Predawn raids were launched on the West Bank towns of Jenin, Jericho and Ramallah, destroying security outposts, government buildings and family homes. In the Beituniya district of Ramallah, shells hit a coffee shop, a mosque and a kindergarten—all perfectly acceptable ‘collateral damage’, and scarcely worth a mention in the Western media. Such Israeli aggression has, after all, been the norm for nearly a year now. Over 600 Palestinians have been killed since the Al-Aqsa Intifada began—four times the number of Israeli deaths; and 15,000 wounded—twelve times more than on the other side. Regular IDF assassinations have picked off alleged terrorists at will, most of the time killing innocents like so many flies. In August, fourteen Palestinians were openly murdered by Israeli troops using helicopter gunships and missiles, to ‘prevent’ them killing Israelis, although at least two children and five bystanders were also slaughtered, to say nothing of many wounded civilians.

Equipped with the latest in American-donated fighter-bombers, helicopter gunships, uncountable tanks and missiles, a superb navy and a state-of-the-art intelligence service, not to speak of its own nuclear weapons, Israel has been grinding down a dispossessed people without any armour or artillery, no air force—its one pathetic airfield in Gaza is controlled by Israel—army or navy, or any of the protective institutions of a modern state. Israel’s cruel confinement of 1.3 million people in the Gaza Strip, jammed like so many human sardines into a tiny pale surrounded by a barbed-wire fence, and of nearly two million in the West

Bank—all of whose entrances and exits are controlled by the IDF—has few parallels in the annals of colonialism. Even under apartheid, F-16 jets were never used to bomb African homelands, as they are now sent against Palestinian towns and villages.

Behind this ruthless military pounding lies a longer-term logic. The destruction of Palestinian society which began in 1948, with the expulsion of 68 per cent of its native inhabitants—of whom 4.5 million remain refugees today—has continued through the thirty-four years of occupation since 1967. Decades of daily pressure on a people whose main sin is that they happen to be there, in Israel's way, have sought to make life impossible for Palestinians, forcing them to give up any resistance, or to leave—as 150,000 have done for Jordan since last year. Community leaders have been jailed and deported by the occupation regime, small businesses crippled by confiscation, farms subject to demolition, universities closed down, students barred from classrooms. No Palestinian farmer or entrepreneur can export their goods directly to any Arab country—their products must pass through Israel, just as taxes are paid to Israel. In a word, the aim has been, as the American researcher Sara Roy has named it, to de-develop Palestinian society.

Today, divided into about 63 non-contiguous cantons, punctuated by 140 Jewish settlements with their own road network banned to Arabs, Palestinians have been reduced to mass unemployment—60 per cent are jobless—and penury. Half the population of Gaza and the West Bank live on less than \$2 a day. They cannot travel freely from one place to the next within the occupied territories but must endure long lines at Israeli checkpoints, which regularly detain and humiliate the elderly, the sick, the student and the cleric for hours on end. Some 150,000 of their olive and citrus trees have been punitively uprooted; 2,000 of their houses demolished; wide swathes of their land either expropriated for the implantation of more settlers—there are currently about 400,000—or destroyed for military purposes.

As for the Oslo 'peace process' that began in 1993, it has simply re-packaged the occupation, offering a token 18 per cent of the lands seized in 1967 to the corrupt Vichy-like Authority of Arafat, whose mandate has essentially been to police and tax his people on Israel's behalf. After eight fruitless, immiserating years of further 'negotiations', orchestrated by a team of US functionaries which has included

such former lobby staffers for Israel as Martin Indyk and Dennis Ross, more abuses, more settlements, more imprisonments, more suffering have been inflicted on the Palestinians—including, since August 2001, a ‘Judaized’ East Jerusalem, with Orient House grabbed and its contents carted off: invaluable records, land deeds, maps, which Israel has simply stolen, as it did PLO archives from Beirut in 1982. Such has been the upshot to date of Ariel Sharon’s gratuitously arrogant visit to Jerusalem’s Haram Al-Sharif on 28 September 2000, surrounded by 1,000 soldiers and guards supplied by Ehud Barak—an action unanimously condemned even by the Security Council. Within a few hours, as the merest child could have predicted, anti-colonial rebellion broke out—with eight Palestinians shot dead as its first victims.

Sharon’s ‘restraint’

A few months later Sharon was swept to power essentially to ‘subdue’ the Palestinians—to teach them a lesson, or get rid of them. His record as an Arab-killer goes back 30 years, before the Sabra and Shatila massacres that his forces supervised in 1982, and for which he has now been indicted in a Belgian court. But he is no fool. With every Palestinian act of resistance, his forces ratchet up the pressure a notch higher, tightening the siege, taking more land, cutting off further supplies, launching deeper incursions into Palestinian towns like Jenin and Ramallah, making life more intolerable for the victims of the occupation—while with each turn of the ratchet, his propaganda machine explains that Israel is merely ‘defending’ itself, ‘securing’ areas and ‘re-establishing control’, with the sole aim of ‘preventing terrorism’. Sharon and his minions even attack Arafat as an ‘arch-terrorist’, although he literally cannot move without Israeli permission, in the same breath that they explain ‘we’ have no quarrel with the Palestinian people. What a boon for that people! With such ‘restraint’, why should a full-scale invasion, carefully bruited about to intimidate the Palestinians, be necessary?

In the United States, where Israel has its main political base and from which it has received over \$92 billion in aid since 1967, Palestinian victims remain nameless and faceless, barely rating a mention on national news programmes. Matters are different with the Jewish dead. The terrible human cost of the suicide bombings in Haifa or Jerusalem settled quickly into a familiar explanatory framework. Arafat hadn’t done enough to control his terrorists; their hatred threatens incalculable

harm to 'us' and our strongest ally; Israel must firmly defend its security. Thoughtful observers will add: these people have been fighting tirelessly for thousands of years anyway; there has been too much suffering on both sides, and the violence must be stopped; although the way Palestinians send their children into battle is yet another sign of how much Israel has to put up with. So, exasperated but still restrained, Israel invaded unfortified Jenin with bulldozers and tanks. In America, Israel has so far won the public relations war that it might seem scarcely necessary for it to put several more million dollars into a media campaign—using 'stars' like Zubin Mehta, Itzhak Perlman and Amos Oz—to further improve its image.

A major debate on American television this August between Palestinian Authority minister Nabil Shaath and the new Labour leader Avraham Burg, Speaker of the Knesset, confirmed the pattern—and demonstrated, yet again, the inability of the Authority and its spokesmen and women to speak up for the Palestinian people. Burg could smugly enunciate one brazen falsehood after another: that Israel has always wanted peace; that Israel is striving to remain calm while Palestinian terrorists—encouraged by the Authority and Arafat, who controls everything—threaten Israeli children with brutal murder; that, as a democrat and peace lover, he was concerned there was no real Palestinian peace camp; that the only difference between Shaath and himself was that he, Burg, was able to exert a restraining influence on Sharon while Shaath could exercise none on Arafat. All making the point, in classic propaganda style—a lie will be believed if it is repeated often enough—that it is Israel that is victimized by the Palestinians. Shaath could only respond with cringing servility to this farrago of lies, plaintively repeating that the Palestinians also want peace; that they long for the return of Oslo; that they are trying to be restrained; that they treat as scripture the AIPAC-sponsored Mitchell Report (whose main authors, Warren Rudman and Mitchell himself, were among the highest paid members of the Israeli lobby during their Senate careers).

Given the precious opportunity to deal with a sanctimonious thug like Burg, why is it that spokespeople like Shaath, Abed Rabbo, Erekat, Ashrawi and rest are not capable of simply reminding him that Israel is daily indulging in war crimes? Of pointing out the fact that literally millions of people are unable to travel, to buy food, to get health care? That hundreds of people have been killed, thousands of houses demolished,

tens of thousands of trees uprooted, vast acres of land confiscated, that settlements continue—and all this during a ‘peace process’? Could they not once speak as human beings, rather than third-rate imitations of Kissinger and Rabin? Even a normally reliable spokesman like Ghassan Khatib seems to have been infected with the virus. Of course it is necessary to respond to questions about truces, agreements and so forth; but are these people so remote from the daily horror of Palestinian life that they cannot even mention it? The reply to questions about the Mitchell Report or the Powell visit has to make the basic point: so long as there is a military occupation of Palestine by Israel, there can never be peace. The overwhelming majority of the violence—tanks, planes, missiles, checkpoints, settlements, soldiers—comes from the Israeli side.

Arafat’s derelictions

Yet as the Israeli noose tightens around the Palestinians, Arafat is still hoping that the Americans will rescue him and his crumbling regime. Now more than ever, he and his coterie continue to beg for American protection. The Palestinian people deserve better. We have to say clearly that with Arafat and company in command, there is no hope. What kind of a leader is this, who has spent the last year grotesquely fetching up in the Vatican and Lagos and other miscellaneous places, pleading without dignity or even intelligence for imaginary observers, Arab aid, international support, instead of staying with his people, and trying to aid them with medical supplies, practical organization and real leadership? What the Palestinians need are leaders who are really with and of their people, who are actually doing the resisting on the ground, not fat cigar-chomping bureaucrats bent on preserving their business deals and renewing their VIP passes, who have lost all trace of decency or credibility.

Arafat is finished. Why don’t we admit that he can neither lead, nor plan, nor take a single step that makes any difference except to him and his Oslo cronies who have benefited materially from their people’s misery? All the polls show that his presence blocks whatever forward movement might be possible. We need a united leadership capable of thinking, planning and taking decisions, rather than grovelling before the Pope or George Bush while the Israelis kill his people with impunity. True leaders of a resistance movement respond to popular needs, reflect the realities on the ground, and expose themselves to the same

dangers and difficulties as everyone else. The struggle for liberation from Israeli occupation is where every Palestinian worth anything now stands. Oslo cannot be warmed over or resuscitated as Arafat and company would like. What is required now are mass actions designed to press on with resistance and liberation, rather than confusing people with talk of a return to Oslo—who can believe the folly of that idea?—or the stupid Mitchell Plan.

What of Israel, stuck in a futureless campaign, flailing about mercifully? As the Irish poet and critic, James Cousins, said in 1925: any colonial power will be in the grip of ‘false and selfish preoccupations that stand in the way of its attention to the natural evolution of its own national genius, and pull[ed] from the path of open rectitude into the twisted byways of dishonest thought, speech and action, in the artificial defence of a false position.’ All colonisers have gone that way, learning or stopping at nothing, until at last—as Israel turned tail from its twenty-two year occupation of Southern Lebanon—they exit the territory, leaving behind an exhausted and crippled people. If the Zionist enterprise was supposed to fulfil Jewish aspirations, why did it require so many new victims from another people who had nothing to do with Jewish exile and persecution in the first place?

Behind the braggadocio and savagery of Sharon’s government, Israeli self-confidence has been falling. True believers in Zionism in the original sense seem to be fewer and fewer. An authoritative Israeli observer has summed up the current scene: ‘Zionism has become no more than an affair of politicking apparatuses and slogans . . . Zionism today? An ideological bric-a-brac where anyone, right, left or centre, secular, traditionalist or integrist, can find something to justify their passions of the moment. Israel has well and truly entered the post-Zionist era.’¹ Naturally, that does not mean a sudden enlightenment has descended on Israeli public opinion. The slow modification of Zionist faith in its original form, as a genuine salvationist nationalism, has often left behind something worse—a sub-ideological racism, filled with hostility and contempt for Arabs. But this sump of prejudices, gathering beneath the hollowed-out, decaying trunk of official doctrines, is much less easy to trumpet round the world as a mission statement of Israel’s existence than

¹ Elie Barnavi, ‘Sionismes’, in Elie Barnavi and Saul Friedlander, *Les Juifs et le XXe siècle*, Paris 2000, pp. 229–30.

the original Zionist message. Those who think that Israel's international position is as strong as ever, as Perry Anderson has argued in this journal, are greatly mistaken.² However relentlessly biased the editorial or opinion pages of the leading American—or, to a somewhat lesser extent, European—press, not to speak of newscasts, may be, the days when the legitimacy of the Palestinian right to national sovereignty could be completely ignored have passed. Many ordinary Europeans and Americans no longer accept the notion that Israel enjoys some special moral status, which makes its policies of dispossession and assassination pardonable. The occupying power still has its imperial protectors abroad. But in the court of world opinion it has grown more isolated, and Israelis know it.

That is what explains the desperate expedients to which its friends in the United States have resorted, as they thrash about in search of a way to extricate Israel from the impasse of its attempts to suppress the new Intifida. Edward Luttwak, of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, exulted in 'the display of uniquely advanced military capabilities' by Israel that allowed the IDF to decapitate Mustafa Zibri in Ramallah and murder scores more Palestinian leaders at will.³ Graham Fuller, former Vice-Chairman of the National Intelligence Council at the CIA, urged the construction—literally—of a Berlin Wall round the occupied territories, patrolled from within by 'international forces', to incarcerate the Palestinians.⁴ Thomas Friedman, star columnist of the *New York Times*, opined that 'the only solution may be for Israel and the US [sic] to invite NATO to occupy the West Bank and Gaza and set up a NATO-run Palestinian state, à la Kosovo and Bosnia'.⁵ What all these brutal and senseless schemes betrayed was a fear that Israel was losing. A real Palestinian leadership would have known how to expose this. The appalling events of September 11th, however, will now doubtless reconfigure the political geography of the Muslim and Arab worlds in unforeseen and dangerous new ways—for all concerned.

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² Perry Anderson, 'Scurrying towards Bethlehem', NLR 10, July–August 2001.

³ 'Israel's Retaliation is on Target', *Los Angeles Times*, 30 August 2001.

⁴ 'Build a Berlin Wall in the Middle East', *Los Angeles Times*, 14 August 2001.

⁵ 'A Way Out of the Middle East Impasse', *New York Times*, 24 August 2001.